

Today

Jan/Feb 2011

refresh, refocus, renew



**“Seeking the Lost”
Norm Prenger**



**“Becoming a
‘Better Sinner’”
Ron Vanderwell**

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re:FRAME MEDIA

this month

Seeking the Lost

Norm Prenger

Thunder Bay, Ontario

How desperate we become when we lose our glasses or our car keys! We turn the house upside-down, looking to find what we've lost.

But are people as important to us as things are? Every day we meet people who have lost their way through life. They are headed in wrong directions that have eternal consequences. Do we have an urgent desire to see them found by Jesus Christ?

This month, our devotions explore the divine love of the seeking Savior and our calling to seek the lost by sharing God's good news.

Rev. Norm Prenger is a graduate of Calvin Theological Seminary. He pastored churches in Alberta and British Columbia before he was disabled by a heart attack and a post-operative stroke. He now lives with his wife, Gwen, near Thunder Bay, Ontario. He enjoys fishing, writing, drumming, and encouraging his fishing partners and neighbors to follow Jesus.

SEEKING THE LOST

They hid . . . among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called . . . "Where are you?"
—Genesis 3:8-9

We've all heard stories about hikers or hunters who, walking in the woods, stumbled across a body. Recently our news reported that hunters had discovered the body of a boy lying in tall grass. Many people had been looking for him. Weeks before, he had donned his knapsack and left home after a disagreement with his parents. What ended his life, investigators said, was a bad fall from a tall tree. How sad!

Every year families and communities work together to search for someone who is lost. Sometimes a precious child goes missing. Sometimes it's a dear grandmother who grew confused and lost her way. In every case everyone hopes for a happy outcome. Anyone who has searched for missing loved ones understands the lengths we will go to try to find them.

The Bible's story of redemption begins with a grieving Creator calling out in the garden, "Where are you?" After the wonderful affirmations he made about his handiwork in the first two chapters of Genesis, this is a question full of deep compassion and urgency. And although the question is first asked in Genesis, the seeking grace that motivates it can be found throughout Scripture.

Do you hear your Creator calling for you? In this new year will you work with God to bring his lost sons and daughters home?

Father, your heart aches for lost souls. Thank you for rescuing us through Jesus, the only way home. Help us lead others to you with the same compassion and urgency. Amen.

FAINT TRACKS OF GLORY

What are mere mortals that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?
—Psalm 8:4

In this psalm the glory of God and the glory of humanity are folded together like the fingers of two hands. And yet it seems like a mismatch. What is our fragile existence compared to the majesty of God? Yet Psalm 8 links the wonder of human existence with divine splendor. God is pleased to fold his glories into ours to create a unique and wonderful fellowship.

Recently I saw a photo taken by the Global Surveyor orbiting 230 miles above Mars. The orbiter zoomed in on NASA's Rover where it plodded across a rusty red desert to explore a crater. Mars' surface appeared chaotic—but there in the dust were tiny tracks showing the human design of the Rover!

The psalmist tells us that God is mindful of our human tracks, as faint as they may seem in the universe. Between the abyss

of outer space and the quanta of subatomic particles are the personal prints of life made in God's image. Heaven zooms in on this track, for it holds the promise of a glorious communion. No matter how plain your life may seem, your Creator wants to weave his handwork into yours.

Next time you lock eyes with a stranger, remember how valuable that person is to God. What sort of trouble has she tracked through? What kind of party would heaven throw for him if he was heading home?

Dear Creator, thanks for zooming in on us. Make us mindful of others who cross our tracks, and provide opportunities for us to hear their stories. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

RESTLESS HEARTS

They set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Harran, they settled there. —Genesis 11:31

After God confused the language of proud Babel, people clustered around their patriarchs and practiced their own customs. There was no shared worship of the true God. Instead of turning to the Creator, people followed petty gods of self-interest.

A Chaldean named Terah left the bustling city of Ur and set out for a new life in Canaan. Why was he restless? What was he hoping to accomplish?

But Terah never got to Canaan. He settled in Harran. Perhaps he became stuck between a yearning for something more and a yearning for what once was. He had buried one of his sons back in Ur. Another son, Nahor, was named after Terah's father. Nostalgia tends to keep people on a short leash. Or perhaps it was the lure of wealth. The pasturelands around Harran

may have looked promising for Terah's descendants. Whatever the reason, the Bible tells us that Abraham's father settled for something short of his earlier goal.

Take some time to read also the list of names in Genesis 11: "From Shem to Abram." It may seem dull, but behind the names are real people. Each generation had its own dreams, conflicts, and compromises.

It's no different today. Only the Lord can show us the way to calm our restless hearts.

God of Abraham, we trust what you've done to give us abundant life through your Son, Jesus, who descended from Abraham. Help us to tell others that no one need settle for less. Amen.

CROSSED LINES

I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.

—Psalm 51:3

The pop band Coldplay has a song about regret for past transgressions: “I was lost, I was lost, crossed lines I shouldn’t have crossed.” Those words could be humanity’s sad anthem ever since Adam and Eve fell into sin. Transgressions overstep the boundaries that God has set to keep us healthy, happy, and faithfully reflecting his love. Overstepping is how we get lost.

Unlike the psalmist, lost people often have little awareness of the boundaries they’ve crossed. But God still wrestles with us in our lostness. The Spirit’s inner work may spark a growing regret, or it might produce a sense of weariness or emptiness—a yearning that the world cannot erase. These can signal that the heart is reaching a turning point.

Don’t dismiss such feelings. Be patient with them. After all, a first step to being found is to ad-

mit to feeling lost. It might feel like an emergency, and that’s exactly what it is—an emerging within. Jesus calls it a new birth (John 3:5-8).

To a lost world, we bear witness that God can turn emptiness into great fulfillment. We share stories of the mercy God showed us when we crossed lines we shouldn’t have crossed. And we trust the secret work of the One who can teach us the wisdom of Christ crucified. “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

God, renew me with the joy of being found by you. And give me a vivid faith, that I may share this good news with others who need to be found. Amen.

THE DESERT GOD

"Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation."
—Genesis 21:18

When God covenanted with Abraham, his eyes were on all the fledgling peoples of earth. He showed Sarah special favor, but he also listened to Hagar and Ishmael's sobs. The name Ishmael means "God hears." Ishmael too was given nationhood and water in the desert.

Hagar and Ishmael, abandoned to the wilds beyond Beersheba, became a preview of God's aim to bless all nations as he made a great people out of these humiliated slaves. It's only by God's grace that deserts become places where blessings abound. Ask Moses, who learned in the wilderness how God's ears are tuned to the cries of the oppressed (Exodus 3:7). Ask John, a voice in the desert, who said God can make a people for himself out of stones (Matthew 3:9). Ask Jesus, who was driven

into the wilderness to be tested (Matthew 4:1).

Comforted by a new hope, Hagar found an Egyptian bride for her son. Ishmael went on to become the father of twelve sons and a daughter. He eventually visited Canaan to make peace with his estranged family and helped Isaac to bury their father (Genesis 25; 28:9).

Why does God show such care to Ishmael? Because God works his saving plan to benefit everyone like him. Ishmael's descendants, like all the world's people, are to be invited home, into the family of God.

O Lord, thank you for the unique cultures, skills, and stories of all nations. Make new pathways in the desert to bring them home to you. Amen.

LOST IN GOD?

The words of the wise are . . . like firmly embedded nails—given by one shepherd.
—Ecclesiastes 12:11

Eastern religion teaches that the goal of life is to lose your personal identity in the ocean of being. Now, there's an irony. True religion is supposed to point the way home to God. But some believe that getting lost is the aim of spirituality: forget that you exist, that the world exists, that good and evil exist. Just shed these illusions and dissolve yourself in the divine ocean like a grain of salt.

Many people today want to "get high" on God, in a big crowd and with big music, in an experience as mesmerizing as the effects of a powerful drug. While true worship should never be dull or monotonous, it's meaningless to pursue feelings of ecstasy. God calls us to be devoted to his Word and to follow the example of Jesus, taking up the cross of kingdom

service. Being found in Christ is what perfects human life.

When we are found in Christ, we come to terms with his death as well as our own. Christ's wisdom grounds us like embedded nails, helping us to make peace with our frailties even when we are young and we feel immortal. In Christ, we also find life to the fullest—with freedom from fear, shame, and soul-crushing perplexities. Life becomes a meaningful adventure, a race, a journey filled with awareness of God's love for us all.

Don't get lost in your religion. Get found.

As an old hymn says, "Yet I may love you too, O Lord, almighty as you are, for you have stooped to ask of me the love of my poor heart." Amen.

KING OF THE LOST AND FOUND

"Has the man come here yet?" And the LORD said, "Yes, he has hidden himself among the supplies." —1 Samuel 10:22

The road to Israel's throne begins with a double search. First, Kish the Benjamite loses his donkeys, and his son Saul and a servant look for the animals but can't find them. Then the prophet Samuel announces that Saul will be king, and Saul disappears. Later he is found hiding in an area where supplies are kept. What an uneven start to Saul's royal career!

Looking for things (and people) is a recurring biblical theme. The road to Christ's throne begins with shepherds looking for a baby. Twelve years later, his frantic parents comb through Jerusalem, looking for their son, Jesus, who says to them, "Me, lost? When I'm in my Father's house, I'm right at home" (see Luke 2).

Of course, the greatest seeker is Jesus himself. Nobody traveled

the country looking for the lost more than he did (Luke 19:10).

These ancient seeker stories aren't coincidental. If Kish could be concerned about lost donkeys, God could certainly use that to bring Saul to Samuel. And Saul was too tall to really lose himself among the supplies. God knew where he was.

What about you and me who have strayed far from God's way of life for us? Will we keep hiding among our baggage, or will we accept our share in the Lord's anointing and return home? What a wonderful invitation for followers of Jesus, King of the lost and found.

Father, your eyes are always on us, your children. Lord, thank you for seeking and finding and transforming us. Amen.

CURSES INTO BLESSINGS

*His wife said to him, "Are you still maintaining your integrity?
Curse God and die!"*
—Job 2:9

My heart goes out to Job's wife. She lost so much—beautiful sons and daughters, a substantial lifestyle, her security and dignity. Now her husband was covered in terrible sores and mumbling praises to God with ash-covered lips. Job's own skin had become for her a living canvas depicting life's cruelty and religion's futility. Something inside of her snapped.

She is not alone. It's ironic, but many folks drift away from faith in God for one of two reasons: life can be either too pleasant or too painful. Both ways of experiencing life can lead us to forget our Creator. A life of ease can lead to laziness, and a life of pain can lead to bitter despair. Satan is happy when we experience either outcome.

The gospel of Jesus Christ doesn't promise a life of ease. It's not some sort of spiritual

painkiller to take away suffering. In fact, to embrace the truth can mean embracing even more pain—for Jesus' sake. Leaving behind lives that are built around sin and selfishness will feel like dying. But death won't have the last word.

Dear woman, look again at your husband, Job. See in his suffering a hint of the coming suffering of your Savior. See in Job's faithfulness to God, despite so much suffering, an expression of the integrity of faith to which we are all called. All is not lost, and all can be forgiven.

Lord, forgive us when we give in to despair. We trust the One who endured the cross for love's better day. With him, may we let it all go into our Father's hands. Amen.

BEING A FRIEND

An unfriendly person pursues selfish ends But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. —Proverbs 18:1, 24

Think of the ways God could have saved us. He could have dazzled and overpowered us; he could have convinced us with absolute proof. Why didn't God do that?

Well, as we can see even in the unusual case of Enoch (Genesis 5:24), God prefers to save us through the dignity of friendship. God befriends the lost. When guilty Adam and Eve hid themselves in the bushes, the Creator didn't first tranquilize them from afar. He walked out to them in the cool of the day, like a friend looking for a friend. Jesus Christ is the ultimate friend who sticks "closer than a brother."

But now Christ invites us to practice the same selfless friendship with those who need his love. Recently I sat in a pastry shop drinking blueberry tea with an old acquaintance. For decades he has resisted committing his

life to Christ, and yet he admits that he recently lost his sense of direction. After listening to him share his disappointments, I invited him to talk to God about helping with his next steps. He didn't immediately take me up on the offer, but I will not abandon our relationship, for God's love reaches out to this person, and I'm a part of that.

Too often we take pride that all our friends love Jesus. Perhaps it's time to enlarge our friendship circle. Is there someone who needs the kind of grace-filled friendship that Proverbs celebrates?

Holy Spirit, lead us to people who are strangers to your love. We offer to you the time and energy to befriend them. Amen.

BEING A LIGHTHOUSE

“Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the LORD.” —Leviticus 19:14

God’s rescue mission doesn’t depend on words alone. Grace also shines through holy living. Israel was to be a brilliant beacon of “the good life” in a neighborhood where nations were steeped in idolatry, deception, cruelty, and vanity. That’s why many of the commands in Leviticus 19 are punctuated by the statement “I am the LORD your God.” To be his lighthouse, our candlepower must pass through the lens of God’s love to shine on our neighbors—including the poor, the blind, the foreigner, the laborer, and the elderly.

Throughout biblical history, people have been drawn to this light—Jethro, Rahab, Ruth, Uriah, the Queen of Sheba, Naaman, and many more.

In seaside lighthouses that’s what Fresnel lenses were designed to do—to bend all available light to

the horizontal so that it can be seen and save lives. A Fresnel lens has concentric rings cut around a bull’s-eye, each ring a prism focusing the light to a narrow beam that can be seen for twenty miles or more. Imagine each command in Leviticus 19 being like a prism beaming holy light to our world’s horizon, declaring, “I am the LORD your God.”

Trying to fit in with the world will only get us lost. And building high walls around our lives will only block the light we were meant to share.

How does your light shine?

Lord Jesus, make us into lighthouses so that the lost can find their way home. In your name, Amen.

BEING A SHELTER

In the shelter of your presence you hide them from all human intrigues
—Psalm 31:20

Francis and Edith Schaeffer were on to something in 1955. In their Swiss home, they established a living and learning community named L'Abri, which means "shelter." To quote from their website, "They sought to provide a shelter from the pressures of a relentlessly secular 20th century." Another form of relentless pressure is the terrorism in our world today. Today's anxieties are generated in many ways, from senseless acts of brutality and callousness to clever manipulation. All of it crushes the human spirit and steals from its liberty.

The psalmist names God as our refuge from powers that tear at our peace. We are invited to know him as our rock and fortress, a sheltering presence when we feel overwhelmed by a world full of arrogance and intrigue. It's a mistake to think

shelter happens just by getting cozy with other Christians—although Christian friends certainly are important. Only the Holy One provides security for the frightened soul. We soon discover that the world snared in our own hearts is what terrorizes us most. We need our Maker as our Refuge—and nothing less.

Read Psalm 31 again; it expresses our fears—and those of our workmates and neighbors. What could you do to make your home a place where people can find refuge in God? Does the peace of God flow out to others through you?

Lord, we hide our fearful hearts in your embrace, where nothing can keep us from living life to the fullest. Amen.

HOW THE KINGDOM COMES

"Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth." —1 Kings 17:24

In this story Elijah goes outside of Israel, the land of God's people, and brings God's blessing to people in another land.

How the Lord directed the woman at Zarephath to welcome Elijah isn't explained. She already had respect for Israel's God, but she wasn't so sure about this prophet.

The woman welcomed Elijah as a stranger and shared her last family meal with him. Amazing blessings followed this selfless decision. Yet would the prophet judge her unworthy?

When her boy fell sick and died, her doubts showed up. She accused Elijah of killing him as punishment for her sins. Only when Elijah interceded for her, covering the corpse of her son with his own body, was she persuaded of his sincerity and compassion. From a Jewish

perspective, Elijah made himself kin with a foreigner rather than keeping himself ceremonially "clean" as a Hebrew. His contact with the dead body of the boy made him "unclean" (see Num. 19:11). God, however, can make dead sons and daughters alive again.

This story of grace flowing through God's homeless servant and his adopted family isn't just a minor footnote. As Jesus himself proved later, it's how the kingdom comes (see Matthew 8:5-13).

Lord, by your Spirit, we invited you in as you stood by the door of our hearts. Direct us to be hospitable to others, both in showing your love and receiving it. Amen.

LOVE'S ARROW

In the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver. —Isaiah 49:2

I've helped churches host services geared to folks who were not yet Christians. A good time to do it was around national holidays devoted to family or romance or harvest. Using popular songs, drama, dance, visual arts, and well-presented messages, we explored with our guests the gospel truth. Some devout believers trace their spiritual awakenings to services like these.

But these services are a lot of work. To borrow a picture from our reading, the arrows require a lot of polishing. How will visiting children be cared for? Is the message understandable to those who are not familiar with Christian vocabulary? Do we print a special program and invitation cards? What is our strategy for keeping in contact with the people we meet? It's a labor of love!

As Isaiah tells us, God's servants exist to display his splendor. It's our burden and our reward. This splendor is too magnificent to be reserved for "members only" because in the fullness of time Love revealed the perfect arrow—Christ—and aimed it at the world's lost heart. In Christ, we too are aimed at the lost, arcing to every island remote from his communion, to every horizon not lit up by the truth of what God has done for us.

Look for his beautiful bow over your neighborhood.

Thank you, Perfect Love, for piercing us and setting us free. The ache reminds us of how lost we were without you and how good it will be for all to come home. Amen.

THE INEVITABLE SACRIFICE

They took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm.
—Jonah 1:15

Witnessing can be risky business. Jonah knew that. It would cost him to get God's message to the ruthless Ninevites. Did those Assyrian lions really deserve a visit from a dove of peace? Jonah didn't think so, and he ran the other way.

The story reminds us that God's mission always involves sacrifice and risk-taking. It taxes our resources. It takes us far from ordinary comforts. It makes us face our own fears and inadequacies. But we are also changed by the mission. We become people of faith and fire, closer to God's heart. As someone said, we become fishers of people, not keepers of an aquarium.

The frightened sailors wondered, "Who's responsible for this storm? Is there a price to be paid to save our lives?" Their ship was an emblem of the human race, pitching in waves of

superstition, selfishness, and death. Finally Jonah took responsibility. He had to sacrifice himself so that the raging seas were calmed and mercy would shine on the lost. Remember, though, that Jonah's sacrifice was marred by mistrust and disobedience. Christ's sacrifice was not.

If you have a lost friend who is open to it, explain that life is often like sailing on the sea. Then share the story of Jesus and his victory—the ultimate "sign of Jonah" (Matthew 12:39-40). Tell your friend how because of Christ you have peace in every storm.

Lord, thank you for saving us. Thank you for sending Jesus and for his sacrifice for us. Send us to others, we pray. Amen.

CANNIBAL SHEPHERDS

"I am going to raise up a shepherd . . . who will not care for the lost, or seek the young . . ."
—Zechariah 11:16

These verses tell us that when God's people forget to gather the lost, a different spirit takes over. Faithful leaders are replaced by spiritual cannibals. The good shepherd breaks his staffs of grace (favor) and unity because his flock won't heed them anymore. Pretenders step in with their personal agendas and false promises. At the end of the Old Testament era, the kingdom was carved up into competing sects and self-serving traditions.

So it will be at the end of this age also. And will anyone remember the mission?

Hallelujah, God will! The New Testament testifies to the Lord's remembering. Our eternal Shepherd came in the flesh. Though betrayed for a small sum of money and handed over to cannibal powers, he sacrificed his precious life to redeem the lost and gather them

into one flock from every tribe and tongue!

Does the church you attend promote the Good Shepherd's priorities or a different sort of legacy? Do you?

Commit yourself to God's purposes alone. He will provide you opportunities to be a part of what he is up to in this world. Even if those opportunities seem small and unlikely, they will bear his marks—compassion for the hurt, the weak, the confused, the discounted, and the lost. Go where Christ's rod and staff are reaching the lost and leading them home.

Dear God, it's easy for us to forget your purposes. Remind us of your grace, our unity, and our mission. Amen.

WHERE TO BEGIN?

"Come, follow me . . . and I will send you out to fish for people."
—Matthew 4:19

Where would you begin? The Messiah was kicking off his mission to save the world. John the Baptist, who had prepared the way for Jesus (Matthew 3), was now in prison. It was up to the King himself.

Flip around the question "What would Jesus do?" What would you do if you had to save the world? What would your message be? Who would you hook up with first?

I don't think many of us would choose to start where Jesus did. If you wanted to start something big, Galilee was an unlikely launching pad. Why not Jerusalem? Or Rome? If you had to name the twelve tribes of Israel, Zebulun and Naphtali were two that you'd most likely forget. And what about Jesus' message? "Repent"? Couldn't he have been more positive? They say honey attracts more

flies than vinegar. But then fish attract flies even quicker—but who takes fishermen seriously?

Jesus had a strategy, but we often miss it because we tend to focus only on the end result: his sacrifice to pay for our sin and give us new life. Yet his mission was also to find people far from God, to heal and equip them so they also would find, heal, and equip others in his name. He wasn't just making a statement. He was starting a movement.

We can start making disciples for Jesus anywhere, anytime.

Master, thank you for finding me and paying my ransom. I want to be an active part of this movement you've begun. Show me how to connect with the lost for you. Amen.

FINDING CHRIST

"Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."
—Matthew 7:14

Maybe you remember playing hide and seek when you were young. Everyone took turns being "it" and counted to fifty before hunting down their hiding playmates.

Jesus wants us to find him. But if the Father, Son, and Spirit do all the finding when it comes to straying sinners, why does it sometimes seem like Jesus plays hard to get? Why, as our verse says, is the gate so small and the road so narrow?

It's because Jesus is making us hungry for his life. He wants disciples who keep growing in integrity, in prayer, in trust, in love for neighbors, in spiritual gifts and fruit, and in a fresh vision of his leading day by day. These treasures are only found in him. A disciple is by definition someone who is endlessly fascinated by the Master and wants to be more like him. We

seek Christ daily because he is both the open door and the difficult road to life.

Jesus warns that not all are attached to him in this way. Some call on his name but delight in finding fault with people, labeling them as hopelessly defective or impure. Some drive 12-lane spiritual freeways designed to maximize self-interest, avoid any crucifixion of unholy desire, and keep the journey of faith as unchallenging as possible.

How are you attached to Jesus? Our Master knows the difference.

We seek you, Lord, and we thank you for moving our souls to keep seeking you. Give us grace to encourage friends who are just beginning the journey. Amen.

CAUSE FOR STUMBLING

"If your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away."
—Matthew 18:9

According to Jesus, little ones are the greatest! But children (and any adults humble enough to become like them) are as vulnerable as they are precious. They're going through big changes. They're not yet full of themselves. For this reason, they can be mistreated by the world's bullies. Woe to those who cause little ones to lose their way! Jesus' most dreadful sanctions are aimed at them.

What about the bully within ourselves? This is another point of Jesus' shocking picture of sawing off our own offending hands or gouging out our own offending eyes. Within each of us is a child of God invited to take his or her place in the kingdom by faith. But there is also within us a dangerous offender who mocks and tries to trip up that child. That bully must be crucified with Christ. Little ones

and bullies cannot coexist for long in the same place.

Our Master was uncompromising about this. Is your heart a haven for spiritual progress and real faith, or has a bully made it a place of ambush?

What if you and your family practiced zero tolerance for spiritual pride and power games so that no one could ever stick out a foot to trip up anyone's baby steps again?

We have abused the new creation in us, Lord, with our own vain eyes, our own manipulative hands, and our own stubborn feet. With your help, Lord, may we never do those things again. Amen.

BEING OUT THERE

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."
—Luke 15:2

Something precious is lost—a sheep, a coin, a son. It's a time for searching and watching. But when the lost is found, it's time to celebrate! Jesus lives for this.

Yet some people thought his methods were too far "out there." Getting cozy with tax-collectors and prostitutes is risky business. You've got to keep an eye on your wallet with such people around. Their bad habits will rub off on you. You'll water down the truth, and time-honored traditions will be compromised. Is that worth the damage to your reputation, Jesus?

When evangelist Bill Hybels started competitive sailing, he invited experienced, "salty" types to be in his crew. Most were not yet Christians. When his boat lined up for the start, occasionally vulgar language could be heard by other boaters who knew Bill to be a church-

going man. It's the kind of price you pay to be "out there" for the lost.

Doesn't Jesus' church live for this? We're a team of shepherds working the high country for lost lambs. We're a sisterhood of women sweeping every corner to retrieve coins bearing God's image. We're a band of sons extending from our Father's open arms till all his wandering children are welcomed home.

You don't have to sail to be "out there" with Jesus. But it can't happen if we always play it safe.

Savior, each one of us is precious to you. You've gone out of your way for us, and heaven applauds our rescue. Make us your mission network. Amen.

THESE ARE NOAH'S DAYS

"Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man."
—Luke 17:26

Jesus was passionate about the lost. If we listen carefully to his words and watch him in action, we can sense his urgency.

If our days are like Noah's, we need to share Christ with as many lives as possible, for a lot of folk are now facing eternity without him. The ark was built, after all, to rescue people from the flood. "It was the same in the days of Lot," says Jesus, before Sodom was destroyed. There is urgency in these stories. Lives are at stake. There's no time to waste.

Everybody's priorities in Noah's days were eating, drinking, and marrying, Jesus said. In Lot's days it was similar. These activities aren't wrong; they might even be noble. But do our church calendars filled with socializing, fundraising, building plans, weddings, and funerals also show Jesus' urgency?

A church leader once wrote how he wanted to be bishop for a day. If he were a bishop, he would ban all talk about evangelism. He believed such talk only saddles church members with unnecessary guilt and anxiety.

Of course, talking about evangelism can be stressful and guilt-inducing if we are unmoved by Christ's compassion for the lost and uninterested in loving them the way he did. That's what happens if we are just living for ourselves.

Lord, we want to be gathered where the Son of Man lives in glory with all his foundlings on earth. Forgive us for filling our time only with everyday busyness. Give us a greater share of your passion. Amen.

SEEING AND NOT SEEING

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son . . .

—John 3:16

You're watching a baseball game on television. In the crowd someone holds up a sign that says "JOHN 3:16." The sign holder may have good intentions, but this isn't the same as proclaiming the greatest truth of all time, is it? For many people, that sign may be a point of ridicule. The crowd sees, but it doesn't really see the point.

Nicodemus was mystified. His traditions and expectations made it difficult to grasp what the Rabbi was saying about being born again. Jesus was talking backwards, as far as Nicodemus was concerned. He saw God in Jesus' miracles but did not see God's intentions.

I need to relearn this lesson every time something I have goes missing. I tend to believe it magically vanished or that some mischievous person stole it to spoil my day. It's amazing how

my wife can make it reappear, often right in front of my own nose or where I left it. I see, but I don't see.

Christ's witnesses remember how difficult it is to "see" something new. Following our Master's example, we make every effort to understand the people we are trying to reach. It's part of loving them. We prepare ourselves to explain gospel truths without getting defensive or avoiding the tension that's always part of learning. We respect a person's need for time to process things. And we depend entirely on daily fillings of his Holy Spirit.

Father, we are entrusted with the truth about your love. To share it, we need your Spirit to move a mountain of misunderstandings and misgivings. Amen.

PLANTERS AND GATHERERS

"Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest."
—John 4:35

Though we are called to live for God in all kinds of careers and vocations, we have to remember one thing: Jesus calls us all to be planters and gatherers.

He wants folks who work hard together to produce his harvest: the rich variety of people from all nations whom God will welcome into his kingdom.

Jesus wants followers who will risk new plantings and tend the soil patiently till it produces. He wants us to see how our livelihood depends on the harvest. Our hearts must beat for it.

Jesus saw Samaritans approaching after the woman he was speaking with told others about him. Jesus had planted a seed, and it was now yielding a crop.

Unfortunately his disciples were wrapped up in their everyday busyness. While it was fine to go into town to get food for Jesus

and themselves (see John 4:8), the disciples paid no attention to the people around them. They ignored the Samaritans' need to hear about the Messiah.

Let's not be a church of people who only go about our daily busyness and forget to share God's love and good news with others.

Let's be a people who eat, drink, plant, work at, and dream of his harvest!

Master, thank you that we can share in your work. We'll keep tilling, planting, watering, weeding, and gathering the lost. Open our eyes so that we see the potential for harvest wherever we go. Amen.

OUT OF COMMISSION!

"Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." —Matt. 28:19

Many churches in North America are in decline. They're either scrambling for solutions to their dwindling numbers, or they're getting ready to close their doors. There's a growing ignorance of what the Bible teaches and a growing assumption that Christianity is just one of many ways to God. Not surprisingly, there's a declining interest in making converts.

Just when our world faces its greatest challenges, our churches seem "out of commission." Yet Jesus spelled out what we are to be doing till the end of time. We're to be going out, making disciples, baptizing seekers, teaching what he taught us, and completely relying on his powerful presence. He promised that his church will crash every gate that hell throws up against it.

How can we turn our churches around? We can insist, for Jesus'

sake, that our churches aim at neighborhood needs, not just membership wants. We can insist that our pastors equip us to be effective ministers and disciple makers. We can enfold ourselves into a smaller "household" group that gathers often to pray, meet needs, engage our spiritual gifts, partner in service, and show hospitality to strangers. We can find ample time to grow meaningful relationships with nonbelievers.

In other words, let's get back to the Master's plan and stick to it.

How did we drift from your plan, dear Jesus? Help us to be willing to gather with others and humbly wait on our knees till we want nothing more than your Great Commission. Amen.

NUMBERS MATTER

The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.
—Acts 2:47

I have four living children and seven grandchildren. I have twin sons who died mid-pregnancy. These numbers count for something significant. They mean something deeper to me than talking about fatherhood in general or the idea that families are important. I value each one in my family.

Sometimes we think numbers don't matter in God's kingdom. We think what really matters is our faithfulness or the quality of our ministries or our spiritual health. But why does Acts 2 mention that the church grew in numbers—some 3,000 on the day of Pentecost? Why point out that “the Lord added to their number” every day? Obviously, numbers do matter to God. Each number represents a dearly missed son of Adam or an irreplaceable daughter of Eve. Now they are

coming home—in numbers. If a plane ditches in the ocean and rescue operations are launched, don't we want to know exactly how many made it home?

Of course things like faithfulness and quality matter. But numbers remind us of actual values. When lost people are retrieved from spiritual death and brought into life through Jesus' redeeming work, when hardened hearts are moved by the Holy Spirit to be reconciled to their Maker, every one counts. Their growing number is a sign that God is blessing a work he also entrusted to us.

Lord, teach us the value of one human life. Teach us the value of working for its rescue and celebrating each homecoming. Please keep adding to our number. Amen.

PEOPLE OF THE WAY

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."
—John 14:6

In an old German fairy tale, Hansel and Gretel use white pebbles to mark their path so they can try to find their way home. Today we can use a handheld GPS with pre-loaded maps. In fairy tales and in real-life hikes through the wilderness, knowing the way home is a good thing—sometimes a matter of life and death!

The first Christians identified themselves as followers of "the Way." It fits with Jesus' reply to Thomas: "I am the way and the truth and the life." Jesus is the living route to safety, to wholeness, to self-control, to rest, to undying life, and to the magnificent love of our Creator. All other routes bring us back to being lost.

People of the Way were completely convinced of this. They shone like white pebbles marking the path to life. Yes, this is

our Father's world. Yes, every inch of the universe belongs to the risen Lord. The first Christians affirmed this too (Acts 4:24; 17:24-31), but they never underestimated this present darkness or our new exodus in Christ. They were not people who had arrived but people who were on the way. There's a big difference between these two points of view, in attitude and in mission.

What if you thought of yourself as a living compass that always points people to Christ, the way home? Who in your life needs to see that in you, even now?

Father, forgive us for not holding high the lamp that can guide people living in darkness. Shape us anew as people of the Way. Amen.

READY TO GO DEEP

"How can I [understand]," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?"
—Acts 8:31

My friend Lou told me a scary scuba story one day. Since we were out on the lake at the time, it was easy to visualize the story. An inexperienced diver panicked and fought to take Lou's respirator. Lou somehow calmed the other diver so that together they could slowly swim to the surface, sharing the same air. My friend's knowledge of diving and calm presence brought life to a situation that threatened death. It's easy to see why divers should never go down into the depths alone!

Traveling the Gaza road in his chariot, an African emissary was struggling by himself to make sense of a sacred scroll. Something about Isaiah's description of a "suffering servant" captivated him: a man who was led like a lamb to slaughter and did not defend himself? An innocent victim shorn of jus-

tice, dignity, and descendants? Though the African eunuch admitted his ignorance and had questions, he was already closer to the truth than many.

Then the Spirit sent Philip to be the man's diving partner. Together they explored deeply Christ's redeeming death, and Philip helped the man rise up in faith as together they breathed the same resurrection air.

Many people outside the faith are careful thinkers. Their searching is marked by integrity, humility, and personal dissatisfaction with how the world is. It's our mission to come alongside them. Are you ready to go deep?

Lord, give us listening ears, sharp minds, and courage to help all who deeply seek truth. Amen.

IF PRISON WALLS COULD SPEAK

The jailer . . . fell trembling before Paul and Silas. . . . "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"
—Acts 16:29-30

I once had the privilege of welcoming the late Richard Wurmbrand into my home. This Romanian man had experienced long periods of imprisonment and unimaginable torture for his faith. As he shuffled through the door of my home, his feet still unable to wear shoes because of beatings he suffered, I felt like I was welcoming an apostle. Wurmbrand was known as "the voice of the underground church."

What amazed me most were the stories of how this man loved his own captors. How he befriended communist soldiers and showed kindness to the very people who caused him so much hardship. He loved them enough to show them the Way back home.

Wurmbrand looked at me intently and said, "I see you have a heart for the lost. Just remem-

ber, it happens one at a time. You make a follower of Christ by showing someone how to make others followers of Christ. Be this kind of example."

To reach the lost where they are means simply coming down to a very personable, vulnerable encounter. We best communicate Christ's contagious life and his passion for reaching God's lost children by getting close.

Paul and Silas understood this. So did Wurmbrand. Do you?

Lord, in our bonds and in our freedoms, in times of pain and times of bliss, in our powerlessness and in our strength, make us channels of your peace. Amen.

GETTING A GRIP ON HIM

"I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD."
—Acts 17:23

Athens is often called the birthplace of democracy and the cradle of Western civilization. It's the home of Plato, Pericles, and the Parthenon. The city has had enormous influence in its 3,400 years of recorded history. No wonder the apostle visited there.

How did Paul present the gospel in Athens? First, he walked the city and paid close attention to its religious monuments, even though he found them disturbing. Second, he visited the Jewish synagogue and shared Christ with both Jews and Gentiles there. Third, he did the same in the Athenian marketplace. Fourth, he accepted an invitation to speak at the Areopagus, a Greek court revived to new respect under Roman rule. And, finally, Paul used local references to tease out what Athenians knew of

God—an inscription to an "unknown god" and popular descriptions of the Supreme God in Greek poetry.

Paul's goal was to present Christ crucified, the risen Lord and final Judge of virtue. Like Socrates, he wanted listeners to admit ignorance and fall in love with the highest Good. However, Christ can't be received by intellectual arguments. He can only be received as a gift through faith. As Dionysius and Damaris discovered, not only did Paul's speech redefine love, justice, and religion; it had the power to change lives. Even in splendid Athens.

Lord, our culture too gropes after you. Give us wisdom to build bridges of understanding that connect with the lost. Amen.

SHARED MEMORIES

We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that . . . we too may live a new life. —Romans 6:4

If you were baptized as an infant, you wouldn't remember the event. That's okay. Every time we witness someone else's baptism, we can be reminded of our own.

The apostle Paul says baptism reminds us that we've been flooded with Christ. In this flood, our sinful self is crucified and buried. Our righteous self is raised to new life. This is how we see ourselves in the world, as a community that remembers we are dying and living with Jesus. It shapes our reaction to temptations and to the challenges of love.

What is disturbing is how some people lose sight of remembering this resurrection grace. They forget they were lost apart from the Savior. They never take note of God's amazing grace or show enthusiasm for new life welling up in their souls. They remember

baptism as an emblem of family pride and formal membership in a particular church. But that robs baptism of its deep truth, and it keeps baptism from being the momentous event that gives shape and form to Christian identity and discipleship.

Many of the earliest Christians celebrated the day of their baptism as their birthday. They also started the practice of being buried near one another on the same plot of ground because even in their "sleep" they wanted to be a community together. God's grace was the power shaping their common road from death to life.

Father, I'm amazed at my redemption, for my heart tends to wander. Remind me that Christ lives in me forever. Amen.

CALLED OUT OF DARKNESS

You may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.
—1 Peter 2:9

Three-year-old Leona was wading in a pond when she was suddenly sucked into a drain once plugged with debris. Fortunately for Leona, her father knew the drain flowed into a nearby river. He and his wife, along with a few passersby, ran to the outlet 150 feet away. Leona says she tried to save herself by doing the “star float,” but that’s hard to do when you are twisting through a dark, narrow pipe with water surging all around. She finally appeared, sputtering and crying, in the swollen river. Her father was able to grasp her and, with the others, help her to safety.

The apostle Peter calls us to “grow up in [our] salvation”—to make peace with our rescue. We were unable to save ourselves from certain death. But Someone mindful of our situation was there to snatch us from

being totally swept away. We cling to the “living stone” just as others who once tumbled in the current have done. We remember the power of mercy. We are repulsed by any power trying to keep us submerged. We adore the light.

After her ordeal Leona wanted ice-cream and chocolate. No doubt she’ll be treated like a princess for some time.

Because of our salvation, we are princes and princesses of the King forever!

It was your strong arms that saved us, Lord Jesus. It was your feet sunk deep in death that kept us from being swept away. Keep our eyes peeled for people who need your saving love and grace. Amen.

HOME FREE

*They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.
There will be no more night.*

—Revelation 22:4-5

It's said that some folks lost in the wilderness run right past their rescuers. They get so focused on escaping that they don't heed signs that help is nearby. If you find yourself lost in the woods, stop pretending you know the way home. Stay put, and wait for rescue.

The Bible's last chapter presents us with two outcomes in history. One is the great homecoming of people admitting they were once lost but are now rescued through Christ. All the faces reflected in the crystal river were cherished in God's heart before the world was made. The children of God from all nations are given the keys to a garden city filled with our Father's joy and loving provision. An inner ache melts away in them. A memory of who they truly are returns in an exhilarating flood. They can

now get down to the business of being home free.

The other outcome in history is the great disappointment of people who kept walking in circles, never admitting they'd lost their way. These are the ones who ignored signs of rescue and counted on their own efforts—magic formulas, moving from one sex partner to another, destroying rivals, setting up idols, and spinning webs of deceit. As our reading says, they are forever left “outside” God's city, like scattered packs of homeless dogs.

Please don't run with them.

Father, today we taste the springs of home, where one day we will be whole and free. In Jesus, help us invite others to a taste of home for his sake. Amen.

this month

Becoming a 'Better Sinner'

Ron Vanderwell

Sacramento, California

Nobody wants to talk about sin. On the one hand, the Bible offers glowing promises that tell how Jesus will make us completely new. But on the other hand—well, we still sin.

This month Pastor Ron Vanderwell invites us to take a different look at a familiar struggle. He urges us to wrestle with the Bible's teachings about sin from the perspective of addiction and recovery. Alcoholics Anonymous and other groups help addicts discover freedom not by pretending to have lost their addictions but instead by surrendering those struggles to the higher power of God's mercy.

What does it look like for addicted sinners to live in recovery?

Ron Vanderwell is the lead pastor of The Gathering, a Christian Reformed church plant that meets in a movie theater in Sacramento, Calif. He and his wife have three sons, two dogs, and one aging VW Beetle. By God's grace he is becoming a "better sinner." Follow his progress at bettersinner.blogspot.com or on Twitter at [ronvwell](https://twitter.com/ronvwell).

STILL SINNERS

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

—Romans 3:23

Most of us like to avoid thinking about sin.

But that's hard to do. The concept of sin comes straight from the Bible, and it sure explains a lot. But at the same time the whole idea of sin can feel so . . . judgmental. So sometimes we simply ignore it, hoping it will go away. At other times we learn to accept it with a tired resignation. (After all, nobody's perfect!) Yet even as we compromise, we can't shake the feeling that we're missing the mark and falling short of something important.

As a child, I thought sin was something to outgrow, like an early bedtime. I remember wondering whether grown-ups even sinned; it was hard to imagine the people in our church ever "being naughty." I'm now one of those grown-ups—and I know better.

We tend to have mixed feelings when it comes to sin. The Bible tells us that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." That includes both children and grown-ups. And many of us have come to suspect the ugly truth—we're not going to outgrow our struggle with sin.

Yet God still promises to make us new. In 2 Corinthians 5:17 God assures us that in Christ each of us can become a "new creation."

How much of a sinner are you?

Lord, you see us more clearly than we see ourselves. Please show us what you want us to discover about ourselves so that we can know your grace and forgiveness more deeply. Amen.

BETTER SINNERS?

"If you hold to my teaching . . . you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."
—John 8:31-32

Fact 1: No one is perfect. We'll always be sinners in this life.

Fact 2: Jesus makes us new, setting us free from our sin.

How can both of these be true? Are we stuck in sin or freed from it? Or both? The Bible assures us that we are new creatures in Christ. But if we're new, why do we still resent people who hurt us? Why do we obsess over buying stuff? Why do we worry as if we have no faith?

Let's get more specific. King David was a sinner: he arranged the murder of a soldier to cover up an affair he had with the man's wife (2 Samuel 11). Yet God called David "a man after his own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22). So, was David also a sinner "after [God's] own heart"? What would that mean?

In this life, we're never done with sin. But God's not done with us either. He makes us new through a process called sanctification. But how does that work? And should we be worried that maybe his sanctification isn't enough?

Here's where the Bible's stories are so important. The more we get to know the sinners of the Bible, the more we begin to discover what it looks like when God changes someone. Then we can see better how God is working to make changes in our lives.

Lord, though we'd rather be congratulated on our spiritual success, we need you to astonish us with your grace. Please turn our eyes toward you. Amen.

RETHINKING SIN

I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me.
—Romans 7:21

Many of us think of sin in all-or-nothing terms: we either are sinners, or we are not. Our problem is that while God does change us, we still carry a life-long tug toward temptation. Experienced Christians are still tempted to covet and lust and dishonor God and others—and lots more. So what's missing?

The recovery movement helps us in looking at this struggle. Alcoholics Anonymous and other groups have helped millions of people come to terms with addictions that won't go away. The idea is simple: while addicts won't be done with their addiction in this life, they can still become free from it. From a Christian perspective, addicts learn to let God lead them into a new life so they are no longer at the mercy of their addiction. A recovering alcoholic may say that while she is still

an alcoholic, she has not had a drink in a decade. She is still an alcoholic, but a much healthier one. A "better alcoholic," one might say.

What if we looked at the stories of sinners in the Bible that way? What if the sins of David and other believers were somehow part of a process of God allowing us to hit bottom and finally turn to his almighty power to be set free? And what if we viewed the Christian community as a network of "sinners anonymous" groups? How would that change our thinking?

Lord, though we often pretend we can master our sin struggles, we really need to be mastered by you. Surprise us into a deeper mercy than we might expect. Amen.

THE SEARCH FOR RECOVERY

Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

—Romans 6:11

Recovery groups are based on the idea that there's only one secret to finding freedom from an addiction—surrender. Addicts who come looking for a little help quickly discover that they don't fit in. The famous "12 Steps" are really nothing more than a means of reaching surrender and staying there, allowing denial to crumble so that God can begin to bring order to our chaos.

The same is true for recovering from our sin addiction. People sometimes turn to Christianity to become a better person, hoping for a little help in curbing their sinful tendencies. But the gospel of Christ has little to offer someone like that. It describes salvation in terms of death—dying to our old selves in order to let God bring us to resurrection life through Jesus Christ, our Savior.

You can't "sort of" surrender to a recovery group, and you can't "sort of" surrender your sin addiction to Christ. Christ cannot change us till we're ready to give him complete permission to make whatever changes he knows we will need. In fact, partial surrender to Christ results in a lifetime of frustration as we're forced to hide the sins we can't control. It makes us hypocrites—"closet sinners."

Have you reached the point of surrendering your sin addiction to God?

Lord, so often we try to think we can conquer our sin on our own. Please lead us into the wonder of complete surrender to you. Amen.

TELLING STORIES

"Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you"

—Mark 5:19

Recovery groups like Alcoholics Anonymous have clear principles and methods, but the power of such a group comes from telling stories. Maybe you've heard the famous opening line: "Hi, my name is _____, and I'm an alcoholic."

Group meetings are essentially storytelling sessions. As group members share their stories, they remember who they really are, what they've been through, and their hopes for the future. Group members are provided with sponsors who walk with them through the ongoing scenes in their story, helping them follow the storyline of their recovery.

In this sense the church is really a recovery group for sinners. As we tell our stories, we remember who we are, we share what we've been through, and we remind each other of just where our hope can be found. We

share how much the Lord has done for us!

In this month's readings we're going to focus on the stories of two recovering sinners from the Old Testament. Jacob, the son of Isaac, was a fast-talking hustler who needed to discover that he had to give up trying to run his own life. And David, a king of Israel, was a passionate follower of God who needed to learn how easily his passions could lead him astray.

From these stories we'll learn how our stories also lead us through the past to the present and into the future—with God's grace.

Lord, lead us by your Spirit to rediscover the old, old story of your saving grace for us. Amen.

FAST ON HIS FEET

"Two nations are in your womb . . . and the older will serve the younger."
—Genesis 25:23

Jacob was quick. You had to give him that.

He had to be. When you grow up with a brother who was built like a tree (and almost as intelligent, it seemed) you have to find some advantage. And Jacob found one: he could talk circles around his brother, Esau, always staying just a step ahead of suspicion. Esau could never quite get ahead of his younger brother.

Jacob's quickness served him well. He outwitted Esau when it mattered most, and he profited handsomely.

Often we consider that kind of quickness to be a good thing. In the news we read about self-made billionaires who achieved their success through quickness and cleverness, and we tend to envy them.

But, at least for Jacob, that quickness came at a price. His mother had always known there would be conflict stirring between her sons. She'd been warned about it by God himself. No matter how things played out, theirs would not be a peaceful life.

It seems that God's desire was not that Jacob would have riches, but that his life would be rich, with the kind of blessing that can't be won through a swindle.

But for Jacob to receive that blessing, he would need to slow down. And that wasn't going to happen anytime soon.

God, we often scramble, like Jacob, for first place. Slow us down so we can receive what you long to give us. In Jesus, Amen.

HUNGRY

He said . . . “Quick, let me have some of that red stew!” . . . Jacob replied, “First sell me your birthright.” —Gen. 25:30-31

The tension between Jacob and Esau grew that eerie day when Jacob somehow talked his brother out of his favored position in the family inheritance. Everyone knew that the older brother received the largest share of the father's wealth. But that didn't slow Jacob.

It was a long shot, but Jacob had nothing to lose by offering his deal.

“What are you cooking?” Esau asked as he stumbled in, famished from a long day of hunting. “That smells great—I need some now!”

“Sure, I'll give you some—in trade,” Jacob replied. Then he made his proposal.

Esau apparently figured, “Well, what good is an inheritance when you're about to die of hunger?”

So he agreed to the foolish trade and wolfed down his stew. Then Esau got up and left. And in this way he “despised his birthright.”

So it was that Jacob set the stage for a lifetime of manipulating and deceiving others. He often used his wits to try to make things go his way.

Jacob wasn't the only one who had to stay a step or two ahead of the people in his life. Some of us have been racing that way for years. But God's grace can get us off the treadmill.

God, sometimes we seem to make progress, only to discover later that we have made problems for ourselves. Help us to follow your way, not ours. Amen.

ON HIS OWN?

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." —Genesis 28:16

The clever bargain Jacob had worked out with his brother eventually cost him everything, but that didn't stop Jacob. After their father, Isaac, died, Esau wanted to get revenge, so it was time for Jacob to go.

Jacob left behind all the physical blessings he had hoped to get from his brother. His fast talking now led to some fast running.

Jacob had to strike out on his own, but he wasn't really alone. He discovered that in a very dramatic way during the night. While Jacob slept fitfully with only a rock for a pillow, God gave him a dream of an open stairway between him and heaven. Angels were ascending and descending that staircase, and God spoke to him, showing that although Jacob had become isolated from everyone else in his life, he hadn't become isolated from God.

The next morning Jacob worshiped in response to his dream. But his worship was the stilted ritual of someone who was merely looking for God to bless the plans he had already made. God's people often do that. We ask him to bless us as we aim to do what we please.

What Jacob didn't know was that God was already ahead of him. No one outruns God. And that's a good thing. For even as we try to outpace God, we discover God coming alongside us with his grace.

God, sometimes we are eager to strike out on our own, pursuing dreams that may not be from you. Remind us of your presence and never let us go. Amen.

ON THE MOVE

Jacob noticed that Laban's attitude toward him was not what it had been.
—Genesis 31:2

In some things Jacob did pretty well as a fugitive. He met a beautiful girl named Rachel and was able to marry her. His father-in-law, Laban, however, was about as devious as Jacob (see Gen. 29-30). So there were some complications involving his in-laws, and yet God blessed Jacob with many children.

Jacob also did well financially. Going into the livestock business with his father-in-law proved to be a good idea—for the most part. But again there were complications with the in-laws that eventually required Jacob to leave.

Actually, it seemed Jacob succeeded at almost everything he did. But just about everything he did also ended up with complications. Jacob learned what it was like to be cheated and deceived by family members, just as he had done to his brother

and father (Gen. 25:27-34; Gen. 27).

Packing in a hurry becomes more difficult when you've accumulated flocks, servants, and a large family. Your wealth can make it harder to pull up stakes and run. The more you have, the more you have to worry about.

But Jacob managed to get away from Laban. Despite his troublesome ways, Jacob had the Lord's help. We might wonder, How long would it take Jacob to realize he should follow God's way and not his own?

God, help us to see the difference between our ways and your way, and to live for you rather than for ourselves. May we rest secure in you. Amen.

TOO FAST, TOO BUSY TO NOTICE

You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me.
—Psalm 139:5

When you're busy and trying to get out fast, you can miss things. Jacob was in a rush, trying to leave quickly with his whole household and all his livestock.

He had good reason to leave; in fact, the Lord had told him to go (Genesis 31:3). Jacob's father-in-law, Laban, had swindled him again and again (Genesis 29-30), and now Laban's sons were stirring up trouble against him (31:1-2). They were jealous because Jacob had become wealthy in spite of Laban's cheating.

What they didn't know was that God had blessed Jacob despite all the trouble Laban had been giving him. They were really no match for God and his power.

The same was true, though, for Jacob. Although God was on his side and he knew it, Jacob still chose to deceive Laban "by

not telling him he was running away" (30:20). Jacob still resorted to his old deceiving ways. When would he notice that he could depend on God and not his own methods?

Generations later, another sinner put it this way: "You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me." Jacob would learn, but it would take a while. Later God even laid his hand on Jacob, and that really slowed him down.

In what ways might we be running? Is our busyness an excuse to avoid facing the truth about ourselves? Are we making so much noise that we can't hear the quiet voice of God's Spirit?

Lord, keep us in step with you, and help us listen to your voice. Amen.

STOPPED

Jacob's gifts went on ahead of him, but he himself spent the night in the camp.
—Genesis 32:21

Jacob was scared that night. In a few hours he would be meeting his brother, Esau, for the first time in decades. Jacob had reason to be nervous: more than 20 years ago his brother Esau had made death threats against him (Genesis 27:41). And the report today was that Esau was bringing 400 men (an army!) to meet him. Jacob waited in the dark, the metallic taste of fear in his mouth.

Using his wits, Jacob had moved quickly. He had diversified his assets, splitting his people and his livestock into two groups, so that one might be spared in case of attack.

Then he sent Esau a gift of more than 500 animals in separate herds: goats, sheep, camels, cattle, and donkeys. Jacob hoped that all these would pacify his brother, whom he had wronged so long ago.

One by one the different groups moved on ahead, and as each group left, the camp grew quieter. As the last noisy herd of animals melted into the night, an eerie silence fell onto the camp.

Jacob was alone.

Have you ever been alone? In those moments when you couldn't run anymore or there were no more plans or strategies to make, what was God teaching you? What lessons did you learn?

Lord, sometimes we surround ourselves with work and planning, or simply with friends, music, or the TV or Internet. Draw us to a quiet place where we can't help encountering you. Amen.

ALL-NIGHT FIGHT

So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till day-break.
—Genesis 32:24

Jacob had quickly made a plan and had set it into motion. After sending even his wives and children ahead of him, he was now alone.

But not for long. Jacob must have bolted upright as he realized an intruder had entered the camp. Who? Someone from Esau's camp? A spy?

The first blows were exchanged without words. Jacob's opponent was strong, and he didn't seem to tire. Jacob, charged with adrenaline, fought like a cornered animal. It became a close fight.

The first frantic moments stretched out into an hour, and then into several hours. Both fighters were quick and strong, and neither would yield. Eventually someone would have to give in, but the odds on this fight seemed even.

When it was almost dawn, the intruder changed his strategy. He touched Jacob's hip, wrenching the joint painfully. As Jacob gasped in pain, his opponent gave his ultimatum: "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob wasn't about to give up—not yet. Whoever this person was, he clearly had supernatural power, and Jacob needed whatever help he could get. So he said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

Who knows what thoughts of desperation Jacob had as he tried to guess what was happening that night? When was the last time you fought desperately for something?

Lord, sometimes we get desperate, hoping for things that only blind us from seeing you. Open our eyes. Amen.

SURRENDER, JACOB-STYLE

The man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." —Genesis 32:26

Jacob was defeated, but he wouldn't just give up. He wanted something in return—a blessing.

What a typical Jacob response: always trying to get something from someone. It's pretty nervy to think of demanding a blessing from someone who has just gotten the best of you.

Yet in Jacob's demand we can hear hints of something that was new for him. Jacob wasn't used to negotiating from a position of total defeat. By this point Jacob knew there was no hope of scrambling his way out of this problem. After a lifetime of thinking that he had to rely on his own wits, he was finally forced to acknowledge his limits. Pinned to the ground, he found himself in the awkward position of having no more options. All he could do was ask for help.

Have you ever been in that position? Flattened by circum-

stances you didn't see coming, and with no option left but to cry out to God for help? Most recovery groups are filled with people who refused to ask for help until their situations became desperate. Jacob was at that point. He knew earlier that he could pray to God (32:9-12), but then he still tried doing things his own way (see 32:20).

This was different for Jacob. And it made him a different person who needed a different name: *Israel*, the "God-wrestler." Sometimes God needs to break us down before he can bring us back up. Has he ever done that to you?

Lord, we know you are in control of our lives. Help us to struggle with but not against you. Amen.

A NEW NAME, AND A LIMP

The sun rose above him . . . and he was limping because of his hip.
—Genesis 32:31

Later the facts came out: God was involved in that fight with Jacob. As Jacob put it, “I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.” But why would God fight with Jacob at a time when he was desperate and afraid?

It seems that here God reached out to Jacob in the only way Jacob would understand—by struggling. Virtually every major relationship in his life was marked with conflict. From the jostling inside his mother’s womb (Genesis 25:22) to his rivalry with Esau as a young man (25:27-34; 27:1-45), to his struggles with Laban over his daughters and his business dealings (29:15-30; 30:25-31:55), and back to Jacob’s fears about meeting Esau again (32:1-23), Jacob struggled with everyone, it seemed. And he usually got the upper hand—until he finally

fought the one Wrestler he couldn’t outmaneuver.

By the time the sun came up that morning, Jacob had a new identity marked by a new name. And he was limping. He would never be the same again.

Jacob was now forced to slow down. But his injuries were also somehow a part of his healing. A few hours later he would be weeping on his estranged brother’s shoulder. Tears of grief mixed with tears of grace. Reconciliation. Renewal. Peace.

It was about time.

God, slow us down enough to learn and grow in the way you want us to. Make us weaker if that will make us stronger in you. Amen.

WRESTLING

Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."
—Genesis 32:30

Why would God wrestle with Jacob? Couldn't he simply have talked with him?

You can't wrestle with just anyone. Unless you're pretty familiar with someone, wrestling can create an awkward situation.

In high school our oldest son, John, had a friend who looked like he could have been his twin: the same build and walk, the same long curly blond hair. At a church event someone snuck up behind this friend, expecting to give John a good scare. He grabbed the teen and tackled him to the ground—only to discover that he'd just blindsided a total stranger. Despite effusive apologies, the situation remained awkward. You're just not supposed to get that close to people you don't know well.

Wrestling requires closeness. Maybe that gives us a clue as

to why God would wrestle with Jacob. And wrestling usually doesn't feel good. After all, it's fighting, not embracing. When God wrestles with us, we're likely to view it as more of a fight than a comforting hug.

In some ways, we all have to wrestle with God. He doesn't change us from a distance. As with Jacob, God gets close enough so he can break us, and make us whole.

But unlike having to say "Uncle" when we surrender, as backyard wrestlers are often forced to do, we can take comfort and strength in calling God "Father."

Father God, help us see that even though struggling with you is painful, you have our ultimate good in mind. Amen.

SINNERS SEEKING GOD

"The LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him ruler of his people."
—1 Samuel 13:14

Sin is inevitable. The Bible clearly explains that each of us has two different selves battling within us: the old and the new. The apostle Paul details his struggle with sin, and he even goes so far as to say, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me?" But then he goes on to say, "Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

So the question is not whether we will sin, but how we will respond to it.

The Bible uses a lot of space to tell us the story of David, the shepherd boy who became a great king of God's people Israel (1 Samuel 16 - 1 Kings 2). For all his greatness, King David was clearly a sinner. Yet the Bible's summary of David's life portrays him as "a man after [God's] own heart." If David was a sinner, then he must have

somehow become a sinner after God's own heart.

But what would that look like?

That's the kind of question that can lead us further into the mystery of Christ's redemption than we might ever wander on our own. So let's look together into the life of this sinner named David.

Let's seek to follow David's example to become "better sinners"—humbled, forgiven, and growing in grace—"better sinners" after God's own heart.

Forgiving God, please walk alongside us as we struggle with our sinful nature. Forgive us, as you forgave David, and shape us to be more like you. Amen.

GETTING IT RIGHT

"People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."
—1 Samuel 16:7

When David was anointed king, it seemed like Israel would finally be heading in the right direction. Israel's first king, Saul, had been a disaster. But David was different! Everyone in Israel soon heard how David killed the giant Goliath (1 Samuel 17), and before long he had many other victories (see 1 Samuel 18:5-7).

But David wasn't an obvious first choice for leadership. When God prompted the prophet Samuel to anoint the next king, no one even considered young David.

But there was something about David that few others recognized: he saw things from God's perspective. And God used ordinary experiences in David's life to mold him into the kind of king God wanted.

Gazing at the night sky, David saw his Creator's finger at work. When his flocks were attacked by a lion or a bear, he knew it was God's strength that helped him to fight them off. And when a giant Philistine warrior mocked the God of Israel, David knew he had to fight for God's honor.

There was something naïve and unbridled in David's heart, something that led him to plunge ahead after God, no matter what the consequences. He saw life through God's eyes.

That's the perspective we need! Often what we really want isn't what we really need. We need most to be people after God's own heart.

God, you love us so much!
Mold us to become people
after your own heart.
Amen.

BLESSINGS AND CHALLENGES

I the spring, at the time when kings go off to war . . . David remained in Jerusalem.
—2 Samuel 11:1

Life in Israel looked good under David for a long time. Battle after battle was fought with God's blessing, and the kingdom began to thrive. Borders were expanded, claimed in the name of the Lord. The little band of Israelite tribes gradually became an empire, a real world power.

Eventually, David could stay home and rest. He could relax for once in his life. God really seemed to have blessed David. This prosperity was in some ways the answer to the prayers of faithful Israelites for many generations. God had blessed the people and expanded their territories, to the honor of his name. To anyone, this prosperity would have looked good. What's not to like about wealth and success?

But blessings come with great responsibilities. And these blessings would bring the greatest

challenges yet for Israel's king and the nation he was leading. David's hard years in the past had strengthened him and had drawn him closer to the God who restored his soul. But sudden ease confronted David with a challenge he had never had to deal with before.

It can be easy to overlook the challenges of prosperity. Most of us naturally hope that God will give a resounding "yes" to the requests we place before him. But would we really ask for those things if we realized the responsibilities and even the dangers they could pose for us?

Lord, you alone know what is truly good for us. Help us to trust in your care. Amen.

WHAT DO WE REALLY WANT?

You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you.

—Psalm 63:1

As the kingdom changed and faced the challenges of prosperity, so did David.

The white-hot passion for God that had burned during David's early years began to cool in the comfort of his newfound prosperity. And, sadly, the less David seemed to need God as his place of safety, the less quickly he sought God to be that refuge. As David's passion for God cooled, other passions began to take its place.

It turned out that David the king was also David the sinner.

What David didn't realize is that things went best for him when he earnestly sought to live for the Lord. Even if things seemed to going poorly because life was so hard, David had strength in the Lord because he called on God for help, and God provided for him. In tough times,

David couldn't even pretend to be self-sufficient. Dealing with hardship reminded him constantly that he needed God.

But David ran into trouble in his prosperity when he overlooked his need for God.

Most of us long for our kingdoms to be established, to sleep in warm castles, with our treasures full and our borders expanding. But do we really know what we want?

It takes much grace to handle the responsibility of many possessions.

God, we so often bring you a list of our needs without really understanding what we need most. Please give us what we truly need. Amen.

THE LITTLE THINGS

From the roof he saw a woman bathing . . . and David sent someone to find out about her.
—2 Samuel 11:1

Most addiction problems seem to start pretty small. Before long, though, they catch us by surprise, leading us to wonder how we could have missed all the warning signs.

That was certainly true with David. His affair with Bathsheba triggered an epic-scale disaster for him, but it didn't start out that way. It started small, with a stroll on the palace roof, a wandering eye, and a desire to "find out about" Bathsheba.

It was the spring of the year. For David, the king that God had anointed to expand and establish his nation Israel, this was his time for leadership. The kings of other nations would surely try to invade, so Israel's king and his armies had to protect their borders.

But as David grew comfortable, it began to seem less urgent

for him to head out with the troops. He had other people who could do that. He could stay back at the palace and—well, do whatever he wished.

David didn't wake up one morning and impulsively decide to have a big problem. It started with a little thing, and it built up from there.

Are there little things in your life that have the potential to become big temptations, which could lead to big sins? What is the Lord asking you to do to head them off?

God, give us the wisdom to see the little things in our lives in which the devil wants a foothold. Help us to look to you for guidance—in all things great and small. Amen.

TROUBLE

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him . . .
—Romans 8:28

Little mistakes can lead to big trouble.

David had actually been in trouble for most of his life: fighting off lions and bears as a shepherd; facing Goliath; pursued by King Saul and then by the Philistines (see 1 Samuel 17 – 2 Samuel 10).

There are two kinds of trouble a person can face. Sometimes trouble comes from following God, as we learn from Matthew 5:10-12 and 1 Peter 2:11-12—and that is a good kind of trouble. It comes from standing against what is wrong. But we can also get into trouble by heading away from God, by doing what is wrong. That's bad trouble, and that's what David got into with Bathsheba.

David could have avoided this trouble. He could have been more responsible and led his

troops out to secure Israel's borders. And even if seeing Bathsheba bathing was a mistake, he could have turned away from the temptation to find out about her.

David was asking for trouble, and he found it. So he went down, toppling like Goliath had fallen so many years before.

It's amazing, though, that God can work even through our bad trouble to accomplish some good. Recovering addicts will often tell how they needed to hit bottom before they would look up to God. This would happen again eventually in David's life too.

God, thank you for lifting us up when we have fallen, and for showing us how much we need you. Amen.

PANIC

"Put Uriah out in front where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him so he will . . . die."
—2 Samuel 11:15

David could see trouble looming when Bathsheba said she was pregnant. This would mean disgrace for Uriah, weakened morale among his troops, and a steep drop in David's popularity polls throughout Israel.

So David took political action. He came up with a strategy for damage control.

He'd already conquered his thousands upon thousands. Certainly he could figure out how to deal with this situation.

But there was a big difference between this problem and the problems David had faced in the past. In his early days of tough times and struggle, David had seen each new challenge from God's perspective. David had depended on God, asking for help and trusting in him.

David had found joy and peace in his difficulties because he

knew that it was God that brought him comfort, not the hope of a warm bed or a nice bath.

But now, instead of being motivated to advance God's kingdom, David was driven to protect his own tottering world.

David was handling this problem on his own. Instead of looking upward, he was turning inward.

David was now serving himself.

But when we serve ourselves, we are following the way of fools.

Lord, warn us when we seek to serve ourselves. Help us to look upward to you rather than inward. Help us to seek you only. Amen.

SURRENDER

I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.

—Psalm 51:3

What made David a “better sinner” in God’s eyes? I hope you can find time today to read 2 Samuel 12—where Nathan confronts David, and David realizes his sin and confesses to God.

When people try to cover over their sin, the worst thing that can happen is that the cover-up might work. If their alibis somehow check out, their lies go undetected, and any possible witnesses are somehow silenced, the guilty can maintain a brittle hypocrisy for years. Recovery groups call it “denial.”

Fortunately God loved David far too much to let that happen, so he allowed all of David’s deceptions to unravel. Eventually the prophet Nathan came to confront him.

God steadily pressed David toward his breaking point, even-

tuallly bringing him to surrender. David’s denial needed to give way so he could acknowledge his trouble and start looking again to a power greater than himself, a power rooted in the grace of his loving God. Things had never looked worse for David. Or better.

He surrendered quickly, falling in repentance before the God he’d been ignoring. He didn’t get caught up in defensive explanations or try to blame others. Psalm 51 gives us a glimpse of the complete surrender he made so that God could draw him toward recovery.

God, we know our transgressions. Help us repent, and create in us a clean heart, we pray. Amen.

STORIES

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.
—1 Timothy 1:15

Throughout this month we've been hearing stories together. We've heard the story of Jacob and the story of David—and how God used the very brokenness of their situations to lead them to real life in him.

The story of the apostle Paul is also inspiring. In our reading today Paul summarizes briefly, saying he was “a persecutor and a violent man”—“the worst of sinners.” But God showed him mercy, pouring grace and faith and love into his life. (See Acts 9:1-31 and then Acts 13-28.)

Recovery groups are filled with personal stories. In the safety of a recovery group addicts begin to rediscover the true story behind their lifetime of struggle. Denial crumbles and secrets are revealed. Guilt and repentance surface. Grace and forgiveness are claimed and shared with others. Members of a recovery

group discover that their own story is reflected in the stories of other people in the group.

The same is true for us all. Every time we read a story about a sinner in the Bible, we have a chance to read a little deeper into our own stories of guilt and brokenness. But the Bible also contains another story: the story of God's grace in Christ. Our personal stories intersect this amazing story of God's love as we trust our Lord's healing power.

Think about your story. Can you sense God's leading? Has your life intersected with the life of Jesus Christ?

God, help us to learn from the Bible's stories, and to discover the stories you are creating in our lives. Amen.

GETTING WHAT WE ASK FOR

[The Spirit and the sinful nature] are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. —Galatians 5:17

Jesus had some sobering news for two of his disciples one day. They asked him to give them what they wanted: positions of high honor in his kingdom. But he said, “You don’t know what you are asking.” He explained that he had to endure great suffering to establish his kingdom—and that his followers would suffer too. Besides, he said, it wasn’t his place to grant positions of honor (see Mark 10:35-40).

Sometimes we don’t know what we ask for, and sometimes getting what we ask for isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Just ask Jacob, who snagged the birthright he’d never use. Or ask David, who caused severe trouble to satisfy his lust.

Perhaps you can tell similar stories about times when you tried to force a pleasure or an achievement or a purchase that

later proved to be foolish. We can’t just do whatever we want.

The starting point for any addict’s recovery is to finally recognize that fact. An addict is a person who desperately longs for something that would be harmful for him or her. The worst thing for addicts is to actually get the pleasure they are asking for. That’s why recovery groups insist on abstinence—quitting the vice and staying sober or clean one day at a time.

As followers of Jesus, we need to walk in step with the Spirit of God. When was the last time you asked God to show you what he really wants for you?

God, show us what you want for us, and train our desires in your direction. Amen.

ADMIT IT

Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
—Psalm 51:5

So what about you? Are you addicted to sin?

The addict's response is predictable: "Of course not. I could quit at any time!" It's called denial, the last defense of the hopelessly addicted.

The same is true for us. It's natural to want to hide our sins. Yet sins are like mildew: they grow in hidden corners. Unchecked by accountability or truth-telling, our sins take on a life of their own as we get used to things that should bother us.

There's a fact that stands behind every recovery group: if you join the group, you're going to have to change. No one joins an AA group looking for drinking buddies. Acknowledging our sins together appropriately can be one of the best ways to clean out the dank corners of our lives.

That's the dynamic that should be present in the fellowship of Christ's church. The church is called to be a community that practices transparency. The point is not to force someone to grovel but to set them free from the lies that keep them from freedom in the Spirit.

Obviously this kind of sharing requires healthy relationships with genuine trust. One of the greatest challenges a church family has is to create an environment where healthy relationships can flourish.

Are you able to share the corners of your heart with trusted people in your community?

God, help us to embrace the truth. May our churches be places of refuge where we can honestly and openly confess our sins. Amen.

CHURCH IN RECOVERY?

Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.
—James 5:16

People often complain that the church is full of hypocrites. They're often right. Every member of every church is a sinner. The only question is whether they might be trying to pretend otherwise.

The only remedy for denial is confession, but confession isn't very popular. Nobody wants to admit they've failed. That's why there's such a strong emphasis today on churches and pastors that help people feel good about themselves. After a while this can all start to sound like Garrison Keillor's description of Lake Wobegon, where all the people are strong, good-looking, and above average.

What if your church was run like a recovery group? Imagine a Sunday morning beginning with your pastor or worship leader announcing, "Hi, my name is _____, and I'm a sinner." Imagine

everyone else responding, "Hi, _____." Then imagine everyone else taking turns sharing their stories of falling and being lifted up by God's grace. Imagine if each song was followed by someone else stepping to the front to share a struggle with temptation from the past week, with someone else offering gospel-based reminders of what it means to live as recovering sinners.

How would that change worship in your church? Would you consider joining that kind of church?

Lord, help us to dare to claim your grace together. May we have the freedom to say to you and to others, "My name is _____, and I'm a sinner." Amen.

FREE AT LAST!

If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

—John 8:36

Fact 1: No one is perfect. We'll always be sinners in this life.

Fact 2: Jesus makes us new, setting us free from our sin.

As we saw at the beginning of this month's study, it can be challenging to get both of these facts to somehow fit together. On some days we do our best to put off our sinful nature, claiming Christ's victory in our lives. Yet on other days it can seem like we'll be stuck with that sinful nature for a long time to come. Sometimes we pretend to be sinless, other times we give in to despair.

This month we've looked at our struggle with sin from the perspective of addiction and recovery. The recovery movement has helped millions of people find a way to acknowledge their addictions while also claiming freedom from their

power. Instead of pretending that we've "gotten over" our sin, we can surrender our sin struggles to Christ, the true Higher Power, and let him lead us into a life of recovery through his Spirit.

What about you? Do you try to pretend that sin has no grip on you? Or have you secretly despaired of ever escaping the power of your sin? Or . . . have you found the freedom the Scriptures offer as you lay your sin addiction at the foot of the cross, letting your Savior lead you in a new life protected for recovery? Is God making you a "better sinner"?

God, I am not perfect. My name is Sinner—saved by grace. Thank you for setting me free, through Jesus' blood. In his name, Amen.

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