

May/June 2011

Today

refresh, refocus, renew



FOOD
THAT
ENDURES

ALSO: CALLED TO BE GOD'S CHILDREN

Dear friends,

This edition of *Today* looks at the gospel through two lenses: food and family. Of course, the two go hand-in-hand. Especially on holidays, families get together to remember, to celebrate—and, yes, to eat.

Family gatherings are often built around culinary traditions. For example, at our house, turkey is customary for Thanksgiving Day, and ham makes an appearance at Easter. Christmas Eve always finds chocolate in the shape of letters filling the stockings by the fireplace. And New Year's Eve is the one time of year when we gather with extended family to make fried cakes.

Food and family—they meet in the church too, around a meal that goes back almost 2,000 years. Ever since Jesus Christ birthed the family that gathers in his name, the church has been enriched at a table known for what might be thought meager fare. But the bread and wine at the Lord's Supper point to a grace so fierce and yet forgiving that it is enough to bind us together with God—and with each other.

As summer approaches, make time for those backyard picnics with family and friends. And make time to gather with God's family for worship. It's worth the effort. After all, such gatherings are a taste of a table fellowship that will stretch to eternity (see Revelation 19:9).

Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bob Haysink". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Bob



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"Food That Endures"
Sergei Sosedkin



**"Called to Be
God's Children"**
Calvin Hoogendoorn

Theological Editor: Robert Heerspink
Managing Editor: Eleanor Lamsma
Executive Editor: Steven Koster

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re FRAME MEDIA

this month

Food That Endures

Sergei Sosedkin

Palos Heights, Illinois

Many readers use *Today* as part of their daily devotional time after a meal. This month Rev. Sergei Sosedkin invites us to reflect on food-related topics and images.

Many biblical teachings are given to us in symbols about food and meals. That shouldn't surprise us. After all, cuisines tend to reflect and define not just our various cultures but all of human civilization. In these devotions the author draws upon biblical passages, life stories, personal memories, and culinary secrets to reflect on being a true follower of Christ.

As Jesus, the bread of life, teaches us, "Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you" (John 6:27).

Rev. Sergei Sosedkin is the Russian-language ministry leader for Back to God Ministries International. He is a native of Moscow, Russia. As he oversees the Russian-language ministry, Rev. Sosedkin works from our office in suburban Chicago and in various locations in Russia.

UNFAILING LOVE

People . . . feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights.
—Psalm 36:7-8

When I came from Russia to the United States as a college student, I was surprised to hear so many questions about my native Russian cuisine. “Why would anyone care?” I wondered while describing our borscht and potato-and-meat salads. Then someone explained to me, “This way we learn more about your culture and you!”

Throughout history, food has played a critical part in shaping and defining our cultures. In fact, human civilizations as we know them place a lot of emphasis on harvesting, cooking, and preserving food. So it’s always helpful to find out about other people’s cuisine when we are getting to know them and their way of life.

Some people are surprised to find that the Bible is filled with food-related references and images. It talks of rich harvests and

famines, of exotic dishes and special wines, of joyful feasts and somber meals. It’s not a cookbook, but all these things help us learn more about God and his kingdom.

Today’s verses talk about the Lord as our ultimate refuge and source of goodness. In his unfailing love, God provides us with food, water, and shelter. All good things are his gifts.

Do you know the Giver as well as his gifts? Are you secure in his protection? Are you drinking from his fountain of life?

Lord, we praise you for your unfailing love and protection. Thank you for giving us food, water, and shelter to meet our daily needs. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

THE KEY INGREDIENT

"[Christ] himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness. —1 Peter 2:24

Borscht is a popular soup with its origins in Ukrainian cuisine. The classic borscht recipe might include all kinds of vegetables and meats. But there's one key ingredient—a red beet that gives the soup its famous deep reddish-purple color. No beets, no borscht.

Do you know the key ingredient of Christianity? It's the cross of Christ. It's true that sincere believers sometimes debate fine points of the Christian faith. But there can be no Christianity without the redemptive message of the cross.

The great theologian Martin Luther put it this way: "No man understands the Scriptures, unless he be acquainted with the cross. . . . The cross alone is our theology."

The historic good news is that Christ died on the cross for our

sins, the innocent for the guilty. Thanks to that, his followers can now receive spiritual healing—new life! As we are joined in faith with Christ's cross and resurrection, we live new lives and present ourselves to God as his instruments for righteousness.

Some people try to be creative. They concoct new religious ideas and beliefs under the name of Christianity. But if the cross of Christ is no longer at the center, you no longer have the gospel.

The cross shows us the power of God's love and mercy and gives us the hope of salvation.

Lord, thank you for sending your Son to die for us. Make us worthy of his cross! And help us to take up our crosses and follow you. Amen.

TO BE CONTENT

Be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." —Hebrews 13:5

As a teenager, I enjoyed going to a neighborhood grocery store. There my friends and I would get a roll of bread and a few slices of cheese for a snack. An elderly lady who worked at the store would always say some kind and encouraging words to us, as she carefully sliced our cheese.

A few short years later the USSR was collapsing. Because of major economic disruptions, all cheese disappeared from the grocery shelves. Most other food items became scarce too. The store was still open, but it sold only bread. My memories of a kind lady who sliced cheese for us seemed almost unreal, but they still warmed my heart in those difficult times.

The Bible calls us to be thankful for and content with everything we have. Our family, health, meals we can share with loved

ones, and of course life itself—all are precious gifts from the Lord. But discontent, greed, or fears don't allow us to fully appreciate and treasure the precious gifts of life.

We don't know what the future holds. We might have to go through difficult times of having "no cheese on the shelves"—or worse. But as the children of God we are assured of his continuous love and care. The Lord himself is our helper in this perilous life.

Father in heaven, thank you for being our reliable helper and protector. Give us a heart of contentment and thanksgiving! Through Jesus, your Son, Amen.

SOMETHING WORTH TREASURING

"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son"
—John 3:16

The Siege of Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) was one of the longest and most destructive sieges in history. Nazi forces held the city hostage for over two years, severely disrupting incoming supplies. This resulted in a terrible famine, and up to 1.5 million people perished.

Those who lived through the siege no longer took daily bread for granted. The aunt of a man I work with was one of the survivors. Mikhail recalls that even 50 years later she planned her grocery shopping in such a way that not a single piece of food would be wasted. On rare occasions when her bread became stale she would soak it in water and feed it to birds.

Today we are focusing on what is probably the most famous verse in the Bible: John 3:16. It has been called "the gospel in a nutshell" because it's a sum-

mary of all God has done for us. But in some parts of the world it has become so familiar that sometimes its truth can be taken for granted.

To those who are aware of their need for God, however, this text is as valuable as a loaf of bread to a hungry victim of famine. Propelled by his love for humanity, God the Father sent his one and only Son to save us. Now those who believe in him are saved from death and destruction—they "shall not perish." Let us treasure this liberating truth every moment of our lives!

Our heavenly Father,
thank you for sending
your Son, Jesus Christ.
Help us to live a life of
thanksgiving for your sal-
vation! Amen.

FEEDING THE HUNGRY

"Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."
—Matthew 25:40

Currently, one out of every seven Americans receives governmental food assistance, or food stamps. The *Wall Street Journal* reports that in some poorer communities lines form in grocery stores at midnight on the first day of the month. That's when the next monthly batch of food stamps becomes valid.

I personally know a hard-working family in Chicago who struggled with occasional hunger after their main breadwinner lost his job as a truck driver. It wasn't easy for them to ask for help, but eventually they did so. The wife was moved to tears when a deacon from their church stopped by for a visit with bags full of groceries.

Most of us are fortunate enough not to know much about real hunger and thirst. From time to time we might complain that we are famished as we wait for

our next meal. But our health is hardly threatened when dinner is delayed for an hour!

For Jesus it was very different. As a person who lived in poverty, he knew the weakening effects of hunger and thirst. He understood the plight of the needy. (See Luke 9:58.) And the amazing part is that when we help people who are less fortunate, we are lending a helping hand to the Lord himself.

Let's look around. It's likely that there are hungry people nearby who need our help.

Lord, help us to see you in the destitute people in our community, in our country, and beyond. May we find concrete ways to help them in your name. Amen.

UNIVERSAL HUNGER

Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry . . ."
—John 6:35

Physical hunger is very real in our world today. The United Nations estimates that up to a billion people in the world struggle with food insecurity. That's about one out of every seven people.

But a different kind of hunger is even more prevalent: spiritual emptiness and insecurity. It extends from the poor to the rich, and from the young to the old.

Of course, exact statistics on spiritual hunger are impossible to come by. But it's safe to assume that the number of those who are spiritually hungry and thirsty in this world is much higher than a billion. And when our stomachs are full, our spiritual emptiness often becomes even more pronounced.

Jesus pointed to himself as the ultimate "bread of life," and he promised "living water" for all

who would believe in him (John 4:10, 14; 7:38). In the Middle East of that day it was impossible to imagine a meal without a good loaf of bread. Bread was easy to keep and transport. And fresh water was precious and often scarce in the desert-like climate of the Middle East.

Jesus graciously invited his listeners to come to him and satisfy their spiritual needs.

Please come to Jesus if you struggle with hunger and thirst in your heart! He alone can satisfy!

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your loving, generous offer of the bread of life and living water, to satisfy the deepest needs of our soul. May we seek and find you. Amen.

PATIENT GRACE

Now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.

—2 Corinthians 6:2

I once had a chance to spend a few days in a monastery. My first meal with everyone there was the most memorable. After an opening prayer we were served a delicious soup followed by the main dish. I was slowly savoring every bit of my dinner.

But after a while I noticed that it was suspiciously quiet in the dining room. As I looked up, I discovered that everyone had finished eating. And now over thirty people were patiently waiting for me before they could proceed to an after-dinner prayer. I felt terribly embarrassed for slowing everyone down, and I finished my meal as quickly as I could. I hate to keep people waiting!

Now, have you or I ever kept God waiting? Maybe right now God is quietly waiting for you. Sometimes, even as we read the Bible and do devotions,

our thoughts can be far away. Sometimes we get distracted and don't really care much for the gospel, prayer, and obedient discipleship—or we engage in them halfheartedly.

Thankfully God's grace and patience are much greater than those of human beings, but we should not aim to keep God waiting. If you are behind in your relationship with him, please note that there is a sense of urgency in our text: "Now is the day of salvation." Today is the day to find peace with God or to recommit to serving him.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your patient grace! You alone can put peace in our hearts. May I be filled with your love and grace today. In Jesus' name, Amen.

UNITED IN WORSHIP

All of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.
—1 Peter 3:8

Do you like caviar? This fish-egg spread is considered a delicacy in some countries. In Russia caviar has traditionally been served when celebrating important festivities or holidays.

Once I was invited to a Russian-American wedding in Michigan. Somehow the bride managed to find Russian caviar and offered it to all her guests. To her surprise, not a single American guest liked it. Some didn't finish their caviar; others didn't even try it.

Even so, the wedding was a wonderful event. After all, we gathered not because we were hungry but to celebrate the couple's love and commitment.

When it comes to worship styles, we all have our preferences. Some prefer traditional worship; others like more contemporary ways of praising the Lord. A worship style that is

not to your liking may seem as strange as some exotic food like caviar. But then others might have similar thoughts about your preferences.

Because of worship-related issues and other disagreements, some congregations become rattled by "worship wars." As a result, their unity suffers.

It's good to remember that we go to church not just to enjoy our favorite music. There are concert halls and other venues for that. True worship is the celebration of our salvation in Christ. The Scripture calls us to be loving and patient with our brothers and sisters so that we can praise God in harmony.

Lord, give us humble and loving hearts. Give us strength to love and treasure all people. Amen.

GOD'S CREATION

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
—Psalm 19:1

Do you enjoy fishing? If you do, it's probably a relaxing form of recreation for you. When my grandfather was young, he had to go fishing to feed his younger siblings. Fishing was a necessity, not a kind of recreation.

Many years later he still fished, but then it was for recreation. Often he would take me along. Together we enjoyed the breathtaking beauty around us. At that time neither of us had a clear understanding that we were taking in the glory of God's creation. Still, we both felt something majestic, almost religious, in the sunrise over quiet lake waters.

Today's verses tell us that God's creation preaches a sermon about its Creator. The whole world is invited to hear and enjoy this proclamation of God's glory and majesty. Creation is not divine, but it does reflect to

us God's wisdom, power, and beauty.

We cannot fully know God by simply admiring his creation, however. Only through God's Word can we begin to know about the Lord's deep love and grace shown in his Son, Jesus Christ. The Scriptures are like powerful glasses that help us to see everything clearly.

Next time you are out in God's world, pay close attention to his amazing work—and praise him for the beauty of his creation as you also give thanks for his love and amazing grace.

Lord, thank you for your world that proclaims your glory. Thank you for sending your Son so that we can see you more clearly and be reconciled to you. Amen.

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR

“Love the Lord your God” . . . [and] ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”
—Mark 12:30-31

A boy of 15 or 16 years approached me in Lithuania and offered to carry my bag in exchange for money.

I asked with some suspicion, “What do you need money for?” Often teenage beggars used money for their addictions. He pointed to his stomach and said he was very hungry.

I wasn't convinced. I told him I wouldn't give him any cash, but I invited him to the nearest grocery store. To my surprise, he agreed.

At the store the boy chose a loaf of cheap bread and a value-size bottle of drinkable yogurt. As soon as I paid for the items, the boy began eating the bread greedily right at the checkout. At that moment I felt guilty for doubting in my heart his pleas for help.

In both the Old and New Testaments we are commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves. On several occasions Jesus himself says that is a part of fulfilling God's law. Again and again he shows us how to love others.

Certainly there are people who might try to take advantage of us. But that doesn't excuse us from helping those who are in real need. Let's not allow our suspicions and cynical attitudes to stop us from showing God's love to our neighbors and from fulfilling God's commandment to us.

Lord, we know that without loving our neighbor we cannot love you. Give us a sacrificial spirit and wisdom so that we can do both. Amen.

THE MOST SECURE REFUGE

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

—Psalm 46:1

When you are enjoying your dinner, do you think about the farmers who grew this food for you? Are you thankful for them? Farming is a difficult job that requires a special kind of talent and commitment.

I'm a city boy, but I've had a chance to visit and make friends with quite a few farmers in the United States and Canada. I always marvel at their work ethic, generosity, and devotion to Christian ministry. One farmer explained why he was so involved in supporting Christian causes. He said, "As a farmer, I depend on God daily. I want others to know that they can lean on him too."

Many of us who live in cities have a false sense of security. I'm guilty of that as well. We think our bread comes from a grocery store and our milk from the local dairy. We forget

how dependent we all are on the many variables that need to fall into place to allow farmers to put food on our tables. We forget how dependent we are on God. Today's passage reminds us that the God upon whom we depend is our refuge and strength—our help in every kind of trouble. Psalm 46 states that even if continents break up and sink beneath surging waters, we are not fearful. What a powerful confession!

No matter where we live or what kind of life situation we are going through, we have secure protection in the Lord.

Father, thank you for being our refuge! When difficult times and circumstances come, we can always feel safe in your love and protection. Amen.

THE MOST LAVISH FEAST

"Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us."

—Isaiah 25:9

Have you heard of Kobe beef? It comes from Japan and makes for the most expensive steaks in the world—more than \$250 for an eight-ounce serving. But this hefty price pales in comparison to three bottles of 1869 vintage wine that sold for a record \$230,000 each at an auction in Hong Kong!

I doubt that many of us will ever feast on a Kobe beef steak or 19th-century wines. Personally, I am not too worried about that. But I do hope we will see each other at a great banquet described by the prophet Isaiah. This is a special feast that is yet to happen. The Lord will gather his people from all over the world. The best cuts of meat and aged wines will be served. Something tells me those steaks and wines will be much better than the most coveted foods of today.

What's the reason for this lavish celebration? It's the sovereign Lord's victory over death, the complete elimination of all mourning and suffering.

We know that on the cross Jesus dealt a mortal blow to death. Because of that, we know we can lean on him as we face this last enemy. Our physical death cannot break our relationship with the life-giving Savior. We are with Christ in death. And, amazingly, we can look forward to Christ's banquet table, where we will celebrate God's complete victory over death and evil.

Father, thank you for saving us. As your people, we are under your care, waiting for the wonderful banquet celebrating your victory. What a celebration that will be! Amen.

TRUE COMFORT

You are my refuge and my shield; I have put my hope in your word.
—Psalm 119:114

What's your favorite comfort food—a special treat that gives you a sense of well-being, a moment of satisfaction? Statistics say that the most popular comfort foods in North America are ice cream, potato chips, and chocolate.

I think it's fine to enjoy an occasional treat. But dieticians warn that the increasing consumption of comfort food is a key factor in today's widespread diabetes and obesity. When we are under stress, it's difficult to put the right amount of ice cream into the bowl. Overeating becomes an unhealthy response to issues that play on our emotions.

Sad and difficult times happen in everyone's life. And everyone occasionally feels overwhelmed and stressed out.

When such times come, we can always find true comfort in

the Word of God. Today's verse comes from the longest psalm in the Bible. Remarkably, Psalm 119 is a devotional reading on the Word of God. The psalmist reminds us of God's wonderful promises and sensible directives for life. His firm conviction is that the Word of God is our best refuge in tough times.

Next time you feel stressed, try using the psalmist's technique. Dive into God's Word, meditate on its wisdom, rediscover his promises for you in Jesus Christ, and trust those promises with all your heart.

Father, thank you for your Word and for the encouragement we find in it. Help us to use your Word to stay focused on Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

THE RIGHT DIET

"Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me." —John 6:57

If you are in the market for a diet, there are many to choose from: Atkins, South Beach, vegan, Mediterranean—the list goes on and on. I believe some diets might be helpful if used in conjunction with a healthier lifestyle. But many of them overpromise and underdeliver. As one doctor said, "The answer isn't a crash diet. It's permanently adopting healthy eating habits."

When it comes to spiritual nutrition, there is no lack of available diets either. But only one spiritual diet works; only one provides the nutritional ingredient we need for a healthy walk of faith.

In today's passage we read that the living Father sent his Son, Jesus, in order to find and save his lost ones. Now everyone who turns to Jesus in faith and depends on him for spiritual food connects to the life-giving strength of God the Father.

Do you want to be spiritually healthy? Do you feel exhausted and disappointed after going through a number of spiritual diets? Do you lack energy for your daily walk with God?

Turn to Jesus, and he will replenish your strength. Remember that every day we need some time for reading his Word, conversing with him in prayer, and reflecting on his love. Let Jesus become your source of spiritual nutrition, and he will never disappoint you. He is the one who supplies spiritual health, inner strength, and life everlasting.

Father, we praise you for sending your Son, our only source of spiritual health. Keep feeding us in our walk of faith! Amen.

GOD'S HANDIWORK

We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works . . .
—Ephesians 2:10

When my friends moved from one Canadian province to another, they didn't know anyone in their new community. What was one of the first things they decided to do in the area? They volunteered at a food pantry and served holiday meals to people who were less fortunate. As they worked, they were surprised to see so many people from all walks of life in need of a free dinner.

During my seminary years I also spent some time volunteering at a food pantry. Our ministry included not only feeding the hungry and homeless but also sharing the gospel, providing advice on social services, and listening to life stories.

Today's passage describes believers as "God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works." Doing good works is not a part of our salvation but

rather our way of living out our faith.

What can you do as God's handiwork to make a difference in your community?

Maybe you can support a local food bank or another outreach program. Maybe you can volunteer at your local church or a local non-profit organization. There are many people out there who are hungry for God's love and our care.

Father God, we praise you for making us new creatures in Christ! In him you have shown us what true love is. Teach us how to love not only with words but also with tangible actions. Amen!

RELATING TO OTHERS

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.
—Ephesians 4:32

One of my college friends was a student from the African nation of Eritrea. I remember I couldn't figure out how he could eat the food that he sometimes cooked for himself. It was so spicy! Even a tiny piece of his dish would burn my mouth for hours.

But that was the food he was used to and had eaten since childhood. He perceived the regular American diet as extremely bland and tasteless.

In our childhood we become accustomed to certain foods. We also learn in childhood how to relate to others. Due to different upbringing and cultural backgrounds, we sometimes perceive other people as hurtful even though they do not mean to offend us. Or we might unintentionally hurt those who are more sensitive than we are.

In today's reading the apostle Paul calls us to be loving and compassionate in our relationships with others. When we talk to our friend, let us remember that he or she might be more sensitive—just like some people are sensitive even to a mildly spicy dish. And if we feel that others are purposefully hurting us, let's keep in mind that they might not have intended to do that. It might be a case of simple miscommunication or misunderstanding.

And even if the offense is real, we are called to be imitators of God in forgiving others as he has forgiven us.

Our heavenly Father, give us your Spirit of kindness and forgiveness. Help us reflect your love in this world. Amen.

A MEALTIME PRAYER

Whatever you do . . . do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. —Colossians 3:17

Many Christians value a tradition of mealtime prayer. A godly farmer once explained to me why such prayer is important to him. “My prayer before the meal is something that really sets me apart from my animals that I feed daily,” he said. Of all earth’s creatures, only human beings can consciously and willfully praise their Creator.

In a mealtime prayer we express our gratitude to God for our food and for all good things in our lives. We thank God for everyone who helped provide and prepare the meal—from the farmer who raised the crops to those who prepared the food. We pray for our loved ones who cannot join us at the table but who are close to our hearts. We also ask for God’s blessing on our mealtime fellowship.

Evgeniy, one of our radio listeners in Russia, didn’t know how

to pray, and he felt too prideful to go to church to find out. He was over 30 years old when he finally read the New Testament for the first time. He tells us that praying turned out to be easier and more natural than he thought.

If you don’t have a habit of regularly communicating with God in prayer—whether at meals or at other times—why not try it? Your prayers can become a great source of encouragement in your relationship with God.

Our heavenly Father, you give us the great privilege of fellowshiping with you in prayer. Fill our hearts with praise and thanksgiving to you! Amen.

BIBLICAL PRAYER

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation . . . with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. —Philippians 4:6

Vending machines are convenient when you are in a hurry. If you have cash, they can supply you a quick snack or drink.

But the technology isn't perfect. Sometimes the machine won't accept your old, worn dollar. Worse yet, it might not deliver a product after swallowing your money. Some unfortunate customers get so upset that they vandalize the machine while trying to take out their purchase.

Sometimes we have similar attitudes as we pray to God. We try to use God as some kind of heavenly vending machine, and we demand quick fulfillment of our prayer requests—or perhaps we should call them “prayer orders”!

When we pray in that way, we grow restless and upset if we don't get the desired results. Our grumbling against God

really does not hurt him, but we hurt ourselves spiritually when we grumble and complain.

Today's verse teaches about prayer attitudes. Biblical prayer is deeply rooted in our relationship with God the Father and in our attitudes toward the people around us.

The Lord is near. So we can sincerely rejoice in his love. That's how restlessness is removed from our hearts. The Scriptures don't say that all prayers will be fulfilled. But we are promised the all-embracing peace of God.

Lord, thank you for being near. That's why we don't have to be anxious about anything. We can pour out our hearts before you, trusting in your love and mercy. Amen.

AN EXTRAORDINARY GIFT

Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others."

—Mark 12:43

North American tourists are known throughout Europe as good tippers. Often the service charge is already included in the price of a restaurant meal, and yet the unsuspecting tourists add a 15% tip to that amount. No wonder they come across as generous!

Today's verses tell the story of a widow's extraordinary gift. As she approached the temple treasury, she put in two very small copper coins. That doesn't sound like much, does it? And yet Jesus says that her donation was the most generous of all, for she gave "everything—all she had to live on."

Clearly the widow's gift wasn't about "tipping God." After all, she could have given just a single coin—or even argued to herself that poverty excused her from giving at all. But instead she placed all her money

in the temple treasury. Her total giving was a sign of her total commitment to God.

As a former waiter who relied on the generosity of the people I served, I believe it's better to err by overpaying the restaurant tip than by underpaying it. And as a Christian, I'm convinced that the Lord doesn't simply ask us to devote a part of our lives to him. He expects our total commitment.

Just a few days after the widow gave her gift, Jesus gave up his life for us—the most generous act in all history. That's why he rejoiced at the widow's generosity. That's why he calls us to be generous and sacrificial.

Father, thank you for your generous gift of salvation in Jesus. Help us to live out our gratitude to you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

POTLUCK

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace —1 Peter 4:10

I remember when I was invited to my first potluck dinner at a church in Michigan. At first I didn't understand what it was all about. I learned that every family had to bring a dish to share with the rest of the guests. It could be any kind of food—from the main course to salads and desserts. Joined together, our dishes made for a delicious dinner—not to mention a wonderful fellowship time. I was very impressed.

When dinner was over, I approached the pastor to compliment him on developing this unique communal experience. He looked surprised. After a pause, he explained to me that such dinners are common in North American communities.

In today's verses Peter calls us to serve others with whatever gifts we have. In some sense our service is like our contributions

to a potluck dinner. Is your specialty a favorite casserole? Or perhaps your signature dish is that special fruit salad! At a potluck, everyone is encouraged to bring their best. Similarly, when it comes to the ministry of the church, everyone has a special talent. Some are called to preach the Word; others are called to teach or to lead social ministries—or to use their gifts in other ways. By doing all these things, we are extending God's grace "in its various forms." We are also praising our heavenly Father.

What are your gifts? Are you using them for God's glory?

Lord, help us to praise you in unity. Give us wisdom to use our gifts to serve others as we work in ministry. Amen!

THE RIGHT SPICE

"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

—John 10:10

Every chef knows that the key to succeeding with many dishes is finding the right combination of spices. You might take the best ingredients and cook them perfectly, but your meal can be bland without a particular kind of pepper or herbs. No wonder that in medieval Europe spices were among the most prized and expensive products. Explorers such as Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama were more interested in finding new spices than gold.

Human life can be compared to an elaborate dish. We might have the very best ingredients. We can be healthy, young, intelligent, wealthy, and beautiful. Yet all those wonderful things don't guarantee a happy life. We need the right "spice" to make our life a success.

Today's verses provide valuable information about that special

"spice." Christ came into this world to make our life complete. He is our only way to eternal happiness and fulfillment. He gives us purpose and meaning for every day, and he brings out the best taste in our life.

The best part is that we don't need perfect ingredients to enjoy the life that Jesus describes. Even if our health is poor or we live in poverty, our loving Christ is able to bring out the best flavor and taste in the dish of our life.

Father, thank you for bringing out the very best taste in our life through your Son, Jesus Christ. Give us wisdom to always listen to his voice. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

REJOICING IN THE LORD

Though . . . the fields produce no food . . . yet I will rejoice in the LORD . . . in God my Savior.
—Habakkuk 3:17-18

Drought, crop failure, war, hunger—these were common fears and events in ancient times. The same is true for many countries in the world today. Even if we live in a more secure environment, we can experience other, painfully real challenges to our faith.

What do you do when your worst fears become reality? How do you respond to tough times? What happens to your walk with the Lord?

Today we turn to one of the most powerful affirmations of faith in all Scripture. Faced with God's predictions of war and devastation, the prophet Habakkuk anticipates hunger in the land. But in the face of upcoming tragedy he proclaims that he will still rejoice in God his Savior. External circumstances are not going to stop him from finding joy in God.

As Christians, we can rejoice in even the most challenging circumstances because of Jesus' death and resurrection. Even in the toughest of circumstances—even when we look death in the face—we know that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:39).

In the midst of suffering, never forget that our God is a loving God, no matter what. By his Spirit he comforts us. He is always in full control of our lives. That joyful reality gives us hope even in the most difficult times.

Heavenly Father, thank you for being with us always! Give us strength to rejoice in your love and protection in Christ, even when life gets tough. Amen.

LIFE WORTH LIVING

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

—Philippians 1:21

Studies have shown that mice that are fed a very low calorie diet live 30 percent longer than those that are fed a diet much higher in calories. The Calorie Restriction Society is now seeking to prove that such a diet will extend human life too. This society is composed of a group of volunteers who consume very little food, hoping to gain a few extra years on this earth. They aren't deterred by the fact that the starving lab animals turned out to be unhappy and aggressive.

Human life is a gift from God. As Christians, we welcome medical research that seeks to improve our quality of life. We also value moderation. I don't think the apostle Paul would agree with a group like the Calorie Restriction Society.

In today's verses Paul tells his readers that he found ultimate meaning not in the length of his

life but in his relationship with the Lord. Paul wrote this letter from prison. He didn't know what his future held, and yet he trusted the risen Christ to carry him through any trial.

To live in the Lord and serve him is wonderful. And to die in the Lord is blessed, for death itself cannot rip us away from our Savior's care. As we face up to our own mortality and that of our loved ones, our hope is rooted in the everlasting grip our Savior has upon his own.

God might grant us a longer or shorter life. But to be truly fulfilling and worthy, our life must be focused in Christ.

Father, thank you for the precious gift of life. Help us serve you each day and to trust you forever, in Jesus. Amen.

RECONCILED TO GOD

We . . . boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. —Romans 5:11

Etiquette gurus relish giving advice on what to eat for business lunches. The most common suggestion is not to order foods that stain, are hard to eat, or get stuck in your teeth. No wonder it took me a while to make my choice during a lunch with radio network executives. I settled on a simple sandwich and a bowl of soup.

But my meal choice turned out to be a disaster. The soup was too spicy. I coughed because of the spice, and my food went down the “wrong way,” into my windpipe. Soon I started coughing badly, almost choking. It looked serious; everyone was alarmed. Fortunately, the Heimlich maneuver wasn’t needed, and I soon began breathing normally again. But our negotiations with that station didn’t go so well.

The first meal described in the Bible was very simple—more like a light snack. But it led to tragedy. At the serpent’s urging, Adam and Eve ate the fruit that God had told them not to eat. They didn’t start choking. But their disobedience to God resulted in sin, death, and our separation from God.

The joyful news is that God didn’t abandon us in our predicament. He sent his Son, who saved us from the grave consequences of Adam’s action and our own disobedience. Through Jesus’ death and resurrection he reconciles us to God the Father.

Heavenly Father, thank for reconciling us to you, through your Son. Thank you for delivering us, in Christ, from the sin of Adam and our own sins! Amen.

THE LAST SUPPER

Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.
—1 Corinthians 11:26

When preparing for a communion service, I'm often reminded of Leonardo da Vinci's vivid mural *The Last Supper* (1498). This painting portrays Jesus and his twelve disciples at a dinner table, at the last meal he shared with them before his arrest and death.

The painting brilliantly depicts the facial expression of every apostle after hearing Jesus' prediction that one of them would betray him. The disciples display different reactions to the news, with varying degrees of surprise, shock, and anger. Even the traitor Judas is taken aback by the sudden revelation of his plan.

What would be our reaction if we were among the apostles at that memorable supper? How do we act when we are reminded of Jesus' death on the cross because of our sin?

Like us, the apostle Paul didn't participate in the Last Supper. He became a follower of Jesus later. But in today's Scripture he briefly recounts the story and draws a direct link to our regular celebrations of the Lord's Supper. Paul declares that at our communion celebrations we proclaim Christ crucified. When we break the bread and drink the cup, we picture our Savior suffering for us on the cross.

When we do that, are we saddened by our own failings? And are we surprised by the power and extent of God's grace? Both responses are necessary.

Father, we are surprised by your grace and mercy. Whenever we celebrate communion, help us grow in the saving knowledge of Christ. Amen.

THE PRECIOUS BOOK

The Holy Scriptures . . . are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.
—2 Timothy 3:15

If you have spent time in any of the major bookstores in North America, you will have noticed the large number of cookbooks available to browse and purchase. There are literally hundreds of choices. You can learn about healthy cooking, exotic ethnic cuisines, and dishes you can prepare in fewer than 10 minutes—all with appetizing illustrations!

Major bookstores in North America also carry Bibles. The selection isn't as extensive as the cookbook section, but it is often plentiful. North Americans are privileged to have a choice of different translations, editions, and commentaries. In other countries and languages Christians can only dream of such variety.

I know some great chefs who have never owned a cookbook. They've committed their favor-

ite recipes to memory. Or they improvise while they cook. But I don't know of a single Christian who could remain spiritually strong without access to the Scriptures. I hope you are able to have your own Bible and are making good use of it.

The Word of God enlightens us, convicts us of our sins, corrects our living, and coaches us in righteousness. But the most important part is that the Bible makes us "wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ." By studying the Holy Scriptures, we find the necessary nourishment and energy for our daily walk of faith.

Heavenly Father, thank you for giving us your written Word. Help us to be faithful students so that we may be nourished and energized by it. Amen.

TAKING CARE OF OUR BODIES

You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.
—1 Corinthians 6:19-20

In the past few years a sobering statistic has emerged: over 300 million people in the developed world are dangerously overweight. Obesity rates are also skyrocketing among children, including children in Nigeria and China. Doctors are now warning about the increasing health risks of obesity.

How should Christians respond to this issue? The Bible doesn't address it directly, since this is a relatively new challenge. But the Scriptures do say that our "bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit." The original context for this teaching was concern about sexual immorality in the city of Corinth. Against this background the apostle Paul teaches an important biblical principle that applies in many situations. As Christians, we are called to value our bodies and take good care of them.

Jesus gave his own body to save us. And we are encouraged to be good stewards of our physical body as well as our soul, for we belong to God both physically and spiritually.

Our genetics influence whether we are tall or short, thin or stocky. Regardless of how we are genetically wired, it's part of our calling to maintain healthy eating habits, moderation, and exercise. There isn't a perfect size waistline for all believers. But God does want us to be as healthy as possible, as we serve him and our neighbor.

Our Father, your Son gave up his own body to save us. Give us wisdom and dedication to take good care of our bodies, because we know they belong to you. Amen.

WHAT'S INSIDE?

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

In Western culture today, being slim is often equated with being beautiful. It's no wonder, then, that in the United States alone the weight-loss market is estimated at \$80 billion per year—or over \$150,000 per second! But dietitians warn that weight-loss products are often not reliable, and some diets are even harmful to our health.

The fascination with being slim starts at a very young age. Photoshopped images of models create unrealistic expectations in children, especially for girls. As children grow up, some start feeling unhappy and depressed. In extreme cases this can lead to serious eating disorders.

We need to be good stewards of our bodies to honor God with the bodies he has given us. The Lord says he does not look first of all at outward appearances. His primary concern

is the disposition of our heart: our character, intentions, and attitudes. God looks at what's inside, not outside.

As our Savior, the Lord expects and treasures our devotion to him. If we are dieting, we have to ask ourselves, "What's our primary motivation?" Are we seeking to honor God through a healthy body, or are we just concerned with our looks? Vanity can be spiritually dangerous. But our devotion and commitment are pleasing to the Lord.

Our Father, help us to be honest with ourselves. Give us the right motivations and set us free from sins of vanity. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

MATURING IN CHRIST

Let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity.
—Hebrews 6:1

Pavel, a listener to our Russian programming, first wrote to us about five years ago. We mailed him a Bible and referred him to a local church that he started attending. Just lately we received an email from him saying that he decided to quit his church because “it’s boring.” He still knows very little about Christianity. What a disappointment!

Every pastor or missionary could probably tell a similar story. In today’s verses the author of Hebrews expresses his disappointment with the slow spiritual progress in converts to Christianity. He wants to share an important teaching with them, but he can’t. His readers are not ready to hear this teaching—it will just go over their heads.

Dismayed, the author says that they still need milk instead of solid food. Many years have

passed since they first expressed their commitment to Christ, and yet they’re still babies in their faith.

Many of us also “shared in the Holy Spirit” and “tasted the goodness of the word of God” some time ago. But we must ask ourselves, “Am I advancing in God’s grace and righteousness?” Studying God’s Word, praying, attending a local church—these are steps that help us mature in Christ and enable us to switch from spiritual milk to spiritual solid food.

Father, thank you for feeding us daily with your Word and Spirit! Make us worthy students of your grace and righteousness. In Christ’s name! Amen.

THE NEW JERUSALEM

"They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God."
—Revelation 21:3

I was a little child when my Christian grandmother told me about heaven for the first time. I didn't know much about God or the Bible, but I was fascinated with the idea of heaven. I imagined that everyone there would enjoy an unlimited supply of bananas. Why bananas? Because they were very rare in the Soviet Union. We'd get them once or twice a year. For me, as a child, nothing could convey true heaven better than the taste of a ripe banana!

When we reflect about our eternity with the Lord, we are at a loss for words. The biblical passages describing heaven are often poetic and symbolic. Inspired by God, the biblical authors use familiar words to try to describe a place that is very unfamiliar to us.

In today's passage the apostle John seeks to convey the beau-

ty and security of the dwelling place for God's children, or the New Jerusalem. This city is as beautiful as a bride at her wedding. And the best part is that in heaven God himself joins us, his people. And with love and compassion he wipes away all tears from our faces and destroys death, pain, and mourning.

Here on earth it's not easy to imagine heaven. But we can rest assured that in his grace Christ has prepared a joyful place for those who trust him. (See John 14:1-4.)

Our heavenly Father, we look forward to one day joining you in the New Jerusalem. Help us to overcome our worries and to trust you fully in our walk of faith. Amen.

THE BEST PART

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

—1 Peter 5:7

What's your favorite part of a meal? Mine is the dessert.

When I was 19 years old, I went for my first independent trip to another city. There I discovered a restaurant that served only sweet foods. A typical meal would include a fruit salad, a "soup" made out of a milk shake, and a main dish based on pastries shaped in the form of steak or chicken. As you can guess, the restaurant also served a variety of stand-alone desserts.

Most customers would order one piece off the menu. But I decided to fulfill my childhood dream and went for a full four-course meal. It looked great. But in the end I didn't feel so good. I didn't even finish my dessert. It turned out that having too many sweets wasn't so wonderful after all.

Sometimes we pray for a long happy life, a kind of never-ending dessert. But it turns out that real life has a wide variety of tastes and flavors. It's sweet when we look into the happy eyes of the people we love. It's bitter when tragedy strikes. Or it gets salty, because of our tears.

Real life is not a piece of cake. It's actually much more nutritious for building up our soul—but only if we humble ourselves before God and fully trust him in Christ.

Our heavenly Father, thank you for giving us food that endures to eternal life in Jesus Christ! Be with us in good times and bad times. May we trust in you fully as you care for us always. Amen.

this month

Called to Be God's Children

Calvin Hoogendoorn

Sioux Falls, South Dakota

Through the month of June we will explore our call to be God's children in the world. That calling invites us to become more like Jesus, God's Son, through the power of his Holy Spirit living in us. He saves us by his grace, transforms us into his likeness, and leads us to share his love and good news with others, to the ends of the earth.

May each of us discover (or rediscover) the privilege of living as a part of God's family in this world, to the praise and glory of God.

Cal Hoogendoorn has served as a pastor in the Christian Reformed Church for more than 20 years in Illinois and South Dakota. Currently he and his wife, Carla, and their four children live in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, where Cal is the pastor of First Christian Reformed Church.

WHO ARE YOU?

To God's elect, exiles scattered . . .

—1 Peter 1:1

How would you answer the question “Who are you?”

You might say, “I am a Canadian,” or, “I am a faculty member,” or “I am a mother.” But a response that identifies your country, your work, or your parental status does not answer the question clearly.

The question is asking about identity, character, and purpose. Peter invites followers of Jesus to courageously profess an answer like this: “I am one of God’s elect, chosen to be part of God’s family spread throughout the world.”

The book of 1 Peter is written to a Christian community that was persecuted for its faith, ridiculed for its lifestyle, and challenged in its purpose. Peter seeks to refresh these believers by recalling their identity as God’s chosen people. They

are children of God whose unique identity is that of citizens of heaven. But more than that, they are holy children of God whose greatest possession is Christ’s holy character. Even more, they are living children of God whose most profound privilege is to glorify God (see 1 Peter 4:7-11).

Regardless of joy or hardship, success or failure, triumph or temptation, God’s call is the map by which we may navigate a satisfying Christian life, serving faithfully wherever we are in this world.

Dear Lord, thank you for our new life in Christ. Guide us not to be conformed to the pattern of this world, and teach us to live a life pleasing to you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

CHILDREN OF GOD

To God's elect . . . who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father. . . .
—1 Peter 1:1-2

Our first call is to be children of God. In fact, the truth that we “have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father” should stir joy in our hearts today and confidence for our future.

Consider the joy for today. God knows our sins, our thoughts, and what we hide from others. He also knows our tendency to disobey and hurt him again and again. Still, because of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, God always welcomes us back into his presence. No wonder John declares: “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!” (1 John 3:1). God wants us to have the joy of full life forever.

Now, consider also our confidence for tomorrow. Scripture says that God made us, saved us, and instructs us. He also dai-

ly guides our paths and promises to lead us to his eternal home. In fact, on this day when the Christian church celebrates Christ’s ascension into heaven, we can rejoice that he is preparing that home for us right now (John 14:1-3; Acts 1:4-11).

Do you ever wonder if we’re good enough for God? Well, we’re not. But that’s the point. We are simply invited to love him who first loved us, and to look forward to the time when he will call us to him! What an incredible privilege!

Dear Lord, please deepen our joy in your grace and give us confidence to face the future. Establish us in your love and lead us in your paths. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

JOY-FILLED CHILDREN OF GOD

In his great mercy he has given us new birth

—1 Peter 1:3

Where there is birth, there is great joy. The Lord brought 42 new babies into our church family this past year. Each mother's eyes that danced with delight and each father's effortless smile showed the joy that is the natural fruit of their child's birth. Similarly, our heavenly Father delights in our being born again through faith.

"Birth" is a biblical metaphor for the past, present, and future life of the child of God. It is clothed in a spirit of celebration! God my father "knit me together in my mother's womb" (Psalm 139:13). He gives us new birth in Jesus Christ (John 3:16) and expresses joy for all who share his life. He also likens our life, with its "present sufferings," to a labor and delivery room that anticipates the joy of eternal rebirth (Romans 8:18-25).

But joy is absent from the lives of some of us. A Christian colleague once admitted, "Joy is not part of my vocabulary." How sad! The Scriptures challenge us as believers to consider all God's blessings and to live in joyous delight.

The psalms especially are full of exhortations to rejoice. "Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation" (Psalm 95:1). How can we not be children of joy?

Will you delight in him who delights in you?

Dear Lord, thank you for the new birth we have received in Christ. We rejoice in your unfailing love and will continue to declare your praise. In Jesus' name, Amen.

HOPE-FILLED CHILDREN OF GOD

In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ . . . —1 Peter 1:3

Many of us have experienced hard times. And during those times we all hope things will get better. Though financial crises, broken relationships, and terminal illnesses each tell a different story, they share the same question: “Is there hope?”

The answer is yes. Through the resurrection of Jesus, the Lord has turned “mourning into gladness” and sorrow into joy (Jeremiah 31:13). This gift has been received through our “new birth into a living hope.”

Christians are privileged to live as God’s new creation. For them “the old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:16-17). The old way is defined by fear of judgment, shame for sin, and despair of life itself. The new way is defined by grace that welcomes home the wanderer, forgiveness that frees

the shame-filled, and love that equips for new service.

The newness we receive gives us the privilege to hope for even greater things. As strangers in the world, we live for the day of Christ’s return, when “there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.” Our ultimate hope is to live with God forever in his renewed creation!

People who have this hope embrace lives defined by Christ, the living Lord of all things, who will come again.

Will you fix your eyes on Jesus?

Dear Lord, thank you for the gift of life and hope. Give us strength to face each day, courage to walk your path, and hearts ready to meet Jesus. In his name, Amen.

ETERNAL CHILDREN OF GOD

In his great mercy he has given us new birth . . . into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. —1 Peter 1:3-4

The promise of a great inheritance of money can give us a sense of security and peace. But any stability created by the world's wealth is always temporary. In the end, the notions of financial peace and economic security are false substitutes for real, fulfilling life with God.

When we allow riches to fill the place in our hearts that should be given to God, we eventually learn that the results are not satisfying. As John D. Rockefeller said, "I have made millions, and they have brought me no happiness."

But the problem is not in wealth itself. Instead, the problem is in our tendency to attribute to this world what is rightly reserved for the new heaven and new earth. The world's treasures quickly perish, spoil, and fade. They are powerless to offer any lasting hope. All earthly

treasures will eventually be destroyed.

The Lord alone grants eternal peace and security. Through his Holy Spirit he affirms that we are his children, secure in his love, and citizens of his eternal kingdom! Only God is able to deliver on the promise "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5).

There is only one way to receive this eternal inheritance—by following Jesus, "the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6). Will you receive him today?

Dear Lord, forgive us for pursuing false security and empty hopes. By your Holy Spirit fill our minds with your truth and our hearts with your peace. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

ENDURING CHILDREN OF GOD

Trials . . . have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold . . . —may be proved genuine . . . —1 Peter 1:6-7

I sometimes wish that faith and trials were mutually exclusive, but the Bible refutes that idea. “Trials . . . have come so that your faith . . . may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor.”

Trials are sometimes self-inflicted. For example, risky behavior often leads to sad consequences. Sometimes trials are imposed on us when someone wishes to hurt or abuse us. Other trials seem unavoidable. Terminal cancer and cerebral palsy testify that our world is groaning under the weight of sin. When it comes to trials, the only question is when and in what way they will arrive.

In response, we can choose bitterness or endurance. Bitterness makes trials more painful. The way of obedience involves endurance that surrenders to God's eternal grace. Why?

For one thing, trials point to God's ultimate goal. The Bible compares times of trial to a birthing process (Romans 8:22-24) that will celebrate new life and result in deliverance from all the effects of evil. In addition, like an excellent jeweler, the Lord will bring his most treasured possessions to journey through the crucibles of fire so that he and his truth will be his children's priority.

I still do not like trials. But one of the greatest miracles is that God uses them so that we can grow, live, and hope in him.

Lord, you see our trials and the crises of faith they often bring. Thank you for loving us enough to help us endure the pain, mature in grace, and grow in hope through your Son. Amen.

ASSURANCE-FILLED CHILDREN OF GOD

Concerning this salvation, the prophets . . . spoke of the grace that was to come to you . . .
—1 Peter 1:10

Does God really love me as the Bible says he does? Does my life really matter much to God? Peter learned that the answer is yes (see John 13:34-35; 15:9-17; 21:15-17), and he understood that others hunger for the same assurance.

The Bible is God's grand story of assurance. It reveals God's faithfulness through the prophets, those bigger-than-life figures like Abraham, Moses, David, and Isaiah. It also reveals God's story of deliverance for every individual who turns to Jesus. The apostle Peter teaches this through his discussion of the prophets.

The prophets spoke a message of grace for each one of us. They also searched—they hungered to know how their words would be fulfilled in Christ. They also served. The Lord revealed to them that they were servants of grace to us.

Ultimately the prophets share the joyful message that life and hope are found in Christ alone. The whole recorded drama of the Bible is for us! As a familiar song puts it, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

Perhaps lingering sin or unhealthy habits or questionable attitudes are eroding your assurance of Christ's love. Yet the Bible says, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31). Is there any better assurance than that?

Dear Lord, sometimes we wonder whether you love or are even interested in us. When we doubt, grant us assurance; and when we feel lost, pour out your love, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

AM I A CHILD OF GOD?

"See, I lay a stone in Zion . . . and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame."

—1 Peter 2:6

What a delight to be a child of God! This delight is based in the fact that Jesus is my Savior and my Brother.

When I am overwhelmed with personal sin, the relentless attack of guilt, or the fear of punishment, I focus on Jesus my Savior. The Bible tells me that Jesus actually became sin for me (2 Corinthians 5:21). Through his suffering and death he removed my guilt and set me free from condemnation (Romans 8:1). Jesus is truly a friend of sinners like me.

And when I face life's daily struggles, I focus on Jesus my Brother. Jesus too experienced temptation, betrayal, and loneliness. Because he shared all of life's joy and pain, he is able to and wants to help me.

When I experience through Jesus the Father's uncompromising love, I am simply over-

whelmed with gratitude, and I want to live with him and for him every day.

The Father wants all of us to become his children, each one a "living stone" whose life, vision, and purpose are clothed in Jesus Christ. There is no such thing as an "ego-driven Christian." Personal pride betrays the gospel and is ultimately doomed. One becomes and lives as a child of God only through humble repentance, childlike trust, and complete surrender to Jesus Christ. If you want to be his child, you can pray in a way like this:

Dear Lord, thank you for inviting me to be your child. I repent of my sin, embrace Jesus as my Savior, and surrender to your will. Thank you for your amazing love! Amen.

HOLY WITH AND LIKE HIM

It is written, "Be holy, because I am holy."

—1 Peter 1:16

A wise person once said, "You live in the presence of God; act accordingly." Those words capture the essence of God's will: to be holy in everything we do. Unlike a life driven by endless do's and don'ts, a holy life is both a gift and a goal.

The Bible tells us much about God's holiness. The Bible praises God's infinite holiness and celebrates his steadfast love and care, making clear that we owe the Lord all praise and honor. God's holiness sets us apart from him and exposes our sin. But the Father has given us Jesus, his Son, to set us free from our guilt. God's gift to us is a holiness we receive through faith in the Savior. Set apart by God for his service, we become "eager to do what is good" (Titus 2:14).

Our goal then becomes holiness, like that of our heavenly

Father. God's gift becomes our passion. The psalmist asks, "How can those who are young keep their way pure?" And God's child willingly answers, "I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you" (Psalm 119:9-11).

God's great love invites us to live in his holy presence. We show our love by joyfully embracing a life lived before God's face.

Is this the wisdom of your life?

Father, thank you for the privilege to live in your presence. Make your holiness my passion and purpose. May I faithfully imitate your character. In Jesus' name, Amen.

HOLY BY GRACE

It was not with perishable things . . . that you were redeemed . . . but with the precious blood of Christ. —1 Peter 1:18-19

For the child of God there is no greater privilege than to embrace the lifestyle of holiness. Why? Because the grace that has redeemed us from death is the same grace that equips us for life.

Grace has redeemed us from “the empty way of life.” The empty way of life can take many forms: trusting in money for security, trusting in performance religion to earn God’s favor, trusting in the goodness of people to build a better future. The truth, though, is that money is temporary, performance religion proves to be never good enough, and people are unable to break themselves free of sin. Both the grace of God and history beg the question “Why place trust in what always comes up empty?”

Grace renews our ability to live in the fullness of true life.

Grace teaches us to say no to ungodliness and yes to living in reverent fear of God. Yet God’s commands are not burdens to be endured. Rather, like guardrails on a treacherous road, they are given to protect us from danger and thus to equip us to enjoy true life (2 Peter 1:3-11). Grace invokes holiness so that we are able to have life “to the full” (see John 10:10).

God equips us, in Christ, to be holy in life. Is this the way you desire to live?

Dear Lord, I praise you for your gift of grace! Comfort me with your deliverance and convict me to live the life of Christ! May you be glorified in my every attitude and action. Amen.

HOLINESS ACCORDING TO THE TRUTH

You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

—1 Peter 1:23

Living well involves standards that we can describe as *faithfulness* and *integrity*.

A holy child of God lives by standards. He or she willingly submits to “the living and enduring word of God.”

God’s Word provides life. It is like a seed that grows to become a living tree. The roots of this tree enable believers to endure every season and storm (see Psalm 1).

God’s Word is also the Spirit’s CPR that revives hearts depleted by the endless assaults of sin and evil (see 2 Timothy 3:16-17).

The purpose of God’s Word is always to nourish life and hope, inspiration and protection.

God’s Word is also light. It shines on our path to define the way we should walk (Psalm 119:105).

It makes clear, among other things, God’s desire for marriage, parenting, racial equality, and generous giving. Christians live not according to personal preference or cultural norm, but instead they pray, “Preserve my life, LORD, according to your word” (Psalm 119:107).

We are loved with God’s eternal truth and graced with his daily guidance. The critical question is “Will that be our confidence and compass?”

Lord, I love your Word.
Help me to read it carefully and prayerfully.
May I gain understanding from your precepts and hate every wrong path. I praise you for your Word.
Amen.

A SPIRIT-FILLED LIFE

To God's elect, exiles scattered . . . who have been chosen . . . through the sanctifying work of the Spirit. . . . —1 Peter 1:1-2

Today is Pentecost Sunday. On this day when the Christian church focuses on the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2), let's reflect on Romans 12:1-2 and look again at the opening verses of 1 Peter.

Christians are called to be children of God—and that means being holy children of God. A holy lifestyle is the natural and joyful fruit of the “sanctifying work of the Spirit.”

What is holiness? Just as a mechanic realigns a car's wheels so it will drive safely on course, so the Spirit realigns human lives and hearts to walk the path of true life. Followers of Jesus begin to have different attitudes, motives, and actions because the Spirit of God is working in them, making them more like Jesus (2 Corinthians 3:17-18).

Holiness must become our great pursuit. As we grow to listen to, learn from, and live by God's Word, we are being transformed by the Spirit. A genuine child of God is eager to hear his voice, be clothed in his truth, and live as one “able to test and approve what God's will is.”

We are often tempted to focus on self-seeking opinions, feelings, and personal comforts. But God's children refuse to be conformed to the world. They are simply committed to holiness, the sanctifying work of the Spirit. Are you following the Spirit's lead and living as a child of God?

Dear Lord, may your Spirit equip me to live a life pleasing to you! Enlighten my mind and direct my path. In Jesus, Amen.

HOLY LOVE

Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth . . . love one another deeply, from the heart. —1 Peter 1:22

A child of God extends holy Christlike love to others. The apostle John states, “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.”

Still, too many Christians have treated others with a malicious spirit and slanderous speech. Some prayerfully seek forgiveness for “honest mistakes” while holding on to grudges against their perceived “enemies.” Others demand empathy for their own pain, but then they callously hurt people whom they see as beneath them. Too often the gift of undeserved grace is forgotten, and in its place a self-righteousness rises and brings harm to others.

What can Christians do instead? Why not love with the patience and kindness of Christ? Why not help others discover the

joy that Christ’s forgiveness has given us? Why not help a restless heart find the peace that Christ’s acceptance achieved for us? Christlike love is always the fruit shown by those who sincerely obey God’s Word. Holy love always seeks to be a servant of God’s grace to all people.

Let’s test ourselves by this truth: “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.” The credibility of the words we speak is measured by the life we live.

Lord, “search me . . . and know my heart.” Forgive my malicious and slanderous spirit. Give me courage to love as Christ loves, and to serve as he has served. In his name, Amen.

HOLINESS AND DECEPTION

Rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit

—1 Peter 2:1

I heard this question recently: “What will the ‘cultural autopsy’ of our generation show?” Could it be that we have succumbed to a spirit of deception? If so, how can we know?

In some ways deception is spiritual. For example, Jesus is treated as one of many equally valid “gods.” Christianity is seen as one of many valid religions. The Bible is considered ill-suited to address issues that we face in our culture today.

Deception can also be personal. For example, I have watched in horror as people use lies and deception to cover up personal insecurities or get ahead at the expense of others. It seems we expect and accept deception as part of human life.

Why are God’s children commanded to rid themselves of all deceit? First, deception hon-

ors Satan, the “father of lies.” Second, as habits of deception become more ingrained, we grow increasingly deaf to truth. Finally, deception only produces casualties—such as the abandonment of personal integrity or the betrayal of public trust that leaves a churning wake of shattered lives.

Since the truth sets people free (John 8:32), why engage in something that enslaves and leads to despair? Instead, let’s follow “the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6).

Lord, you have taught that people who guard their lips guard their life. Deliver me from a deceptive heart and unclean lips so that I can testify to your purpose and will. Amen.

HOLINESS AND HYPOCRISY

Rid yourselves of all . . . hypocrisy . . .

—1 Peter 2:1

What would you think of a pastor who routinely lied or a marriage counselor who had an extramarital affair? The word *hypocrite* would probably come to mind.

A hypocrite tries to project a personal image that is false. For example, a hypocrite can pretend to live by moral principles while pursuing a lifestyle that defies the gospel.

The call to rid ourselves of hypocrisy is an invitation to adopt a lifestyle consistent with Christ-centered faith: “Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature” (Romans 13:14).

Who is a hypocrite? It could be any or all of us. Every honest Christian struggles with inconsistencies between faith and life. The apostle Paul acknowledged

this when he said, “I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing” (Romans 7:19).

The critical difference between a struggling believer and a calloused hypocrite is desire. Getting rid of hypocrisy means developing a heart that grows to hate evil and “cling to what is good” (Romans 12:9). God’s children live by this motto: “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33), in God’s strength, of course.

Is your desire consistent with God’s?

Lord, create a pure heart and renew a steadfast spirit within me. May your Spirit teach, counsel, and direct me in your truth. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

HOLINESS AND ENVY

Rid yourselves of all . . . envy . . .

—1 Peter 2:1

Are you frustrated that your family isn't as refined as some others are? Are you disgusted that you've driven the same car for 15 years while your neighbor enjoys the latest luxury vehicle? If these or similar concerns plague your soul, the sin of envy may be consuming you.

On the one hand, a desire for the success that others have seems harmless. Who doesn't want some of life's perks? But desire can easily become poisonous envy when it begins to resent the successes, luxuries, accomplishments, or any other blessings of others. When envy wins, everyone loses.

How do you know if you are envious? Does a spirit of discontent dominate your soul? Does a spirit of coveting prevent you from celebrating the Lord's goodness toward others? Do you ask God to bless you more

than your neighbor? Would your peers say you act as if the universe revolves around you?

Contentment is the cure for envy! Through the extremes of poverty and hunger Paul learned a timeless lesson: "I can do all this through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13). Contentment finds value in God's love rather than in human achievement, and it finds purpose in obedience rather than in trying to keep pace with others. Only a life lived for God will deliver us from envy.

Lord, help me be content, whatever the circumstances. Deliver me from envy, and by your Spirit teach me to adopt your thoughts and goals. In Jesus' name, Amen.

HOLINESS AND SLANDER

Rid yourselves of . . . slander of every kind.

—1 Peter 2:1

The Bible declares that “the tongue has the power of life and death” (Proverbs 18:21). We have all experienced the pain of someone twisting our words, turning our lives into an object of gossip, or openly defaming our name. We would much prefer to taste the joy that comes through words of encouragement.

Slander is the evidence of a malicious spirit. It willfully misrepresents the truth. It defies Jesus’ teaching to treat others as we would treat ourselves. It aims to make ourselves look better than others. Ultimately, to slander is to share in the “native language” of the father of lies, Satan. No wonder the Bible says, “The LORD detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy” (Proverbs 12:22).

The child of God, however, commits to speak publicly and

privately with words that have the power of life. One historic Christian confession states: “God’s will is that I never give false testimony against anyone” and that “I should do what I can to guard and advance my neighbor’s good name.” I cannot control another’s slanderous words. But I can choose to protect the integrity of all by using Christian speech.

“Those who guard their lips preserve their lives, but those who speak rashly will come to ruin” (Proverbs 13:3). Will you commit to holy speech?

Lord, I am a person of unclean lips; please cleanse me. May I speak encouragement, not slander; praises, not curses. Use my lips for your glory. Amen.

HOLY SELF-EXAMINATION

I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil.
—Romans 16:19

An examined life honors the call to holiness.

I find two self-examination questions particularly helpful.

First, *Who is my cornerstone?* The cornerstone was considered a building's most significant stone because it defined the building's orientation and design. In order for a Christian to be a "living stone," honoring God's design and oriented to his purpose, Jesus must be the "cornerstone."

Second, *Am I becoming a spiritual house?* Through his Spirit, Jesus breathes life and vitality. I may desire Christ as my cornerstone, but I must also open my heart to his rehabilitation work. I must choose to have a mind captive to him, an attitude rooted in him, and a lifestyle modeled after him.

After crossing the Jordan River on dry ground, the people of Israel built a stone monument as a lasting testament to the life-changing power of grace (Joshua 4). For a living stone, the underlying self-examination question is this: "Is my whole life a testament to the power of grace?"

Perhaps we should embrace the wisdom of Proverbs 28:26: "Those who trust in themselves are fools, but those who walk in wisdom are kept safe."

Dear Lord, examine my heart, test my thoughts, and expose my motivations. Purify me so that more and more I will grow in your love and be transformed by your truth. In Jesus' name, Amen.

HOLY AND PRIVILEGED

You are a chosen people . . . that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness . . . —1 Peter 2:9

I once had the privilege of eating lunch with the governor of Illinois. I enjoyed the honor of the event and the conversation we shared, and I even participated in a photo session before it all ended. But, as memorable as that was, it pales in comparison to an even greater privilege.

A moment with a temporary politician is soon over, but the child of God lives in God's presence forever through Jesus Christ—"God with us." I am privileged to daily converse with him and to serve as his representative. That is the essence of holiness—a life "set apart" for Christ!

Holiness is God's gift of grace to us. He declares that we are "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession." Holiness is also our gift of gratitude to God. Overwhelmed by God's generosity, I joyfully

receive it and gratefully boast in the One who gave it.

It is sad that many people think of holiness as a list of suffocating rules or as an unsatisfying way to earn God's acceptance. Some quit. Others judge. Many are confused. All miss the grace that says "we are God's handiwork" (Ephesians 2:10). They miss the gratitude that delights in knowing that even the tiniest growth is an impressive testimony to the Giver.

Holiness earns nothing, but it sure says a lot about God's gracious character!

Lord, thank you for the gift of holiness. From this day forward I will gratefully declare your gracious name. May my life be a testimony to your glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.

A LIVING CHILD OF GOD

Live such good lives . . . that . . . [people] may see your good deeds and glorify God
—1 Peter 2:12

What is God's specific will for my life? Am I called to drive a truck or build houses? Am I to be a physician or a physical therapist? Is my home to be in Amsterdam, Chicago, or Toronto? Those who live for Jesus cannot escape such questions.

In the Christian life there is no division between the sacred and the secular. In all we do, we are to be God's holy children. The world is God's stage. We are privileged to partner in his drama of grace. God calls us to different roles in this ongoing drama. But each of us plays a part in demonstrating Christ's lordship over all of life.

We are given significant freedom to choose how or where to serve him! Do you want to be a stay-at-home mom, developing the values and vision of godly children? Do you want to be a church planter, provid-

ing opportunities for people to meet the one true God? Do you want to be a plumber, using your skills to provide solutions for people's hygienic needs? Do you want to be a research scientist, assisting us all to be greater servants of creation care? Unlimited opportunities are available through the gifts, talents, and resources God has provided in his world.

Peter reminds us that our unbelieving neighbors are reading our lives. So we want to take this command seriously: "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Colossians 3:17).

Lord, help me to commit to live for you. May I seek to live my life for your glory always. Amen.

CALLED TO SUBMISSION

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority.

—1 Peter 2:13

Are you willing to submit to people in authority over you? Your answer may reveal whether you are content to live as one of God's chosen people in the world.

The Bible teaches that submission is the appropriate demeanor for God's children. In his writings Peter teaches that the child of God is to submit to "every authority," whether in government, in employment, in marriage, in community, or in the church. These examples make a critical point. Since the Lord instituted authorities, to disobey them is to disobey him.

What does it mean to submit? Like a car yielding to the flow of traffic, submission means blending into the flow of God's kingdom work. It sounds simple enough, but most of us dislike the idea of submitting. Some even suggest it is the enemy of

freedom. The truth, though, is that God provides grace and freedom through submission. Sin compels a person to live in an ever-shrinking universe called "me." Submission is the grace that frees us from sin's personal blinders by calling us to live within a community. The kingdom gospel is a world-embracing gospel, and I am to accept my civic responsibility in order to give expression to it.

So "submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority."

Dear Lord, by your Holy Spirit give me courage to exercise the privilege of submission—to you, your Word, your call, and to all authority that you have established. In Jesus' name, Amen.

LIVING UNDER AUTHORITY

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities.

—Romans 13:1

Living as God's people may come out most dramatically in the world of politics. We need to know there are at least two God-given reasons to submit to governing authorities.

First, we submit "for the Lord's sake." Christians affirm that government has a limited scope, yet they recognize it may be used to advance God's glory, for the Lord often chooses to work through government for the benefit of all people.

Second, we submit for society's sake. Government's role is to build and protect a good and just society for all. Establishing speed limits, for example, is a wise safety practice for everyone. And obedience even to laws that we find less than ideal helps to establish a stable society.

Of course, there is an authority above that of government.

Peter's instructions were given to a church persecuted by the Roman emperor Nero. Christians are not obligated to obey laws that call for disobedience to God (see Acts 5:29). However, Christians are not free to repay evil with evil (see Romans 12:17-21). Since all people bear God's image, believers in Christ accept the responsibility to seek, pray for, and serve the good of society.

Who knows how the Lord will use us when we honor his appointed authorities?

Lord, thank you for the freedom I have in Christ to do good in my community. Bless our leaders with a sense of justice and good for all people. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

LIVING AND SUFFERING

It is commendable if you bear up under the pain of unjust suffering because you are conscious of God. —1 Peter 2:19

"The pain of unjust suffering" inflicted by "those who are harsh" is a common experience. It may be the pain of a difficult family relationship, bullying in the work place, or, as in Peter's day, slavery. It may also be caused by lies and deception, gossip and slander, or neglect and self-interest.

How should the child of God respond? According to the Bible, Christ's own experience of suffering is our example!

Jesus exercised integrity by refusing to answer evil with evil. Payback is really only a form of reverse injustice, so it only makes suffering worse. Jesus also exercised patient hope by entrusting himself "to him who judges justly." Finally, Jesus exercised grace by bearing the punishment for human sin in order to make forgiveness available for all. The truth is that justice

without grace is legalism void of hope.

The Christian faith is realistic: "In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33). But as we deal with suffering and seek justice for all, we guard against either promoting ourselves or pitying ourselves. Whatever we do, it should bring honor and glory to God (1 Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:17).

No one has suffered greater injustice than Jesus. That is why he is also our only hope.

Lord, forgive me for the sins I have committed against others, and help me to endure unjust suffering by following the example of Christ, my Lord and my hope. In his name, Amen.

LIVING MARRIAGE

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

—Ephesians 5:21

Much has been said about the “crisis of marriage.” Same-sex unions, adultery, co-habitation, and pornography all challenge God’s design of marriage as a one man, one woman union defined by loyalty and fidelity.

The solution is found in the faithful practice of mutual submission. Whether the chosen phrase is “submit yourselves” or “be considerate,” the key qualifier is “in the same way.” God calls husbands and wives to imitate Christ by living as sacrificial servants to one another. How?

First, a Christian couple lives in reverence for the Lord. God, not humanity, created marriage. God’s will, not our own, is to be honored in it. Next, couples are to embrace the inner beauty of Christ-centered purity and respect. Such character builds trust and security, deepens commitment and fidelity, and ensures

the joy of permanence. Finally, a couple’s uncompromising love and faithfulness serve as a living example of God’s generous love that is able to win over others.

The “crisis of marriage” will be solved when couples courageously “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” In fact, marriages rooted in and reflective of his loyalty, fidelity, and permanence are necessary for a society to be healthy!

What is the story told by your marriage?

Lord, we praise you for your constant faithfulness and love in Jesus Christ. Help us to imitate your love in marriage and in all other relationships. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

LIVING WITH OTHERS

All of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.
—1 Peter 3:8

Perhaps you identify with this statement, as I do: “I don’t mind Jesus; it’s his friends that drive me crazy.”

Who are Jesus’ friends? They are Republicans and Democrats, strong-willed employers and lazy employees, adulterous wives and unfaithful husbands, self-important leaders and fickle followers. Like you and me, they are consistently imperfect.

How is it possible to be sympathetic and compassionate while living with the sharp edges of another’s flaws? The words *truth*, *test* and *trust* may help.

The *truth* is that we are to love as Christ has loved, extending to others the very grace we receive from him. The *test* is whether our actions are Christlike. Even an appeal to pure motives is not an excuse to “repay evil with evil or insult

with insult.” Finally, we are to *trust* the ways of Christ. Peter asks, “Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?” Even if some do us harm, at least we have been faithful to the proven ways of God.

We cannot control the insecurities or idiosyncrasies of others, and we should not fuel their fires of disharmony. Why not control our speech and actions, and trust God to deal with the actions of others?

Lord, I thank you for your forgiveness of my sin, and for your endless patience with my flaws and weaknesses. Help me to share with others the grace I have received from you. Amen.

LIVING WITNESS

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. —1 Peter 3:15

The Christian's great privilege is to be a living witness of Jesus Christ! But each of us must ask, "Why would I 'revere Christ as Lord' and place hope in him?"

Here are my reasons.

First, consider Christ's care over us, his children. The gentleness and respect I am called to exercise is itself a testimony of Jesus. When he saw crowds, he was filled with compassion (Matthew 9:36).

Second, consider Christ's cleansing. Just as the flood in Noah's day symbolized the cleansing and renewal of creation (Genesis 6-9), baptism in Christ symbolizes the cleansing and renewal of life through his death and resurrection (Romans 6:1-11). Christ's caring forgiveness renews life and stirs hope.

Finally, consider Christ's call. He rules all creation and will set

it free from the dehumanizing effects of sin and evil. In fact, judgment involves his care and cleansing that invites all to live in the full beauty and blessing of true life!

Some may resist or ridicule our witness to Christ as the world's one true hope. That alone is reason to "always be prepared." Is there any better answer than to share him who is able to help us because he suffered the same betrayal, abuse, temptations, and fear we daily experience (Hebrews 2:17-18; 4:15)?

Are you a prepared witness?

Lord Jesus, equip us to be living witnesses for you. Help us to care as you cared, to forgive as you forgave, and to wisely hope in your return. In your name, Amen.

LIVING FAITHFULLY

They do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.

—1 Peter 4:2

I met with a prayer circle that included a converted Muslim. His decision to follow Jesus resulted in being disowned by family, threats to his spouse, and fear of physical harm. Even so, because “the end of all things is near,” he resolved to live “for the will of God.”

Faith can face painful challenges. But because the Lord “set eternity in the human heart” (Ecclesiastes 3:11), Peter articulates reasons for faithful living:

- God’s Son: Armed with Christ’s attitude, believers focus on eternal hope rather than temporary pain.
- God’s deliverance: Christians celebrate freedom from debilitating desires and the self-abuse of disobedience to God’s will.
- God’s judgment: Content that the Lord makes “everything beautiful in its time” (Ecclesiastes 3:11), God’s

children trust him who will judge justly.

- God’s encouragement: Encouraged by the Lord’s faithfulness, Christians serve to encourage fellow believers in their struggles.
- God’s glory: Rejoicing in salvation, believers accept suffering as the birthing room for God’s glory to be fully revealed.

Christians will continue to encounter pressure to disobey God. Yet they refuse to be blinded by circumstances and to live only for the moment. Instead, they live for Christ and his return!

Lord, when we are weary of attacks on our faith, strengthen us with eternal vision, encourage us with grace, and surround us with love. Amen.

EQUIPPED IN THE CALL

Humble yourselves . . . under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.
—1 Peter 5:6

We expect children to grow from childhood to adolescence to adulthood in order to live productive lives. The same is true in our spiritual lives. God's children, born of the Spirit, are called to grow out of spiritual infancy into Christlike maturity (see Ephesians 4:11-16).

The church of Christ exists for that very reason. Through it, God provides growth and guidance for his children.

The church needs leaders who model God's call in Christ and are willing to serve the body of Christ sacrificially. The church also needs members willing to honor its leaders, and to accept encouragement and guidance from those whom God has appointed to servant leadership. God knows we cannot live in isolation. We need a voice of assurance in times of doubt, a confidant to enter into our per-

sonal struggles, and a teacher to show wisdom's path.

This is possible only when God's Word and Son remain the church's foundation and focus. But leaders sometimes abdicate their call by protecting the status quo under the guise of peace and unity. And congregations sometimes resist leadership, especially when selfish pride feels threatened by the demands of grace.

Our lives flourish when we are in communities of grace where Christ is honored and his Word is obeyed. If you are not part of a church community, commit to finding a place where you can grow with others.

Lord, guide your church to grow in grace, to be clothed in holiness, and to live daily for your glory. In Jesus, Amen.

VIGILANT IN HIS CALL

Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. —1 Peter 5:8

Every serious-minded child of God identifies with Peter's struggle for spiritual consistency. Bold to declare his allegiance to Jesus, Peter was also quick to sell out his commitment under pressure (Mark 14:29-31, 66-72). Paul describes our dilemma: "Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me" (Romans 7:21).

The truth is that where the Lord works, Satan "prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." Jesus announces free forgiveness, yet Satan makes us question whether we are worth saving. When truth is declared, Satan questions the Bible's reliability. Where a spouse is loyal, Satan entices infidelity. Satan is committed to derailing God's work.

So we are called to "be alert and of sober mind." How? First of all, we need to learn God's

truth. We must accept God's Word, take it into our heart, and obey its commands.

We must also listen to advice. By seeking the guidance of trusted, seasoned believers, we learn from the experience of others and tap into their God-given wisdom and insight.

Also we must live in prayer. We daily humble ourselves before God, confessing our sins and seeking his guidance.

Satan is on the prowl. But we need not fear. God's grace equips us to be vigilant and to stand firm in him.

Lord, I know I am your child, but I am often assaulted by the evil one. Protect me from temptation and write your truth on my heart. Amen.

CALLED TO GRACE

I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it. —1 Peter 5:12

John Newton's hymn "Amazing Grace" is a favorite of many people. We all hunger for the grace that "saved a wretch like me," assures us of safety "through many dangers, toils, and snares," and builds our confidence that grace "will lead [us] home."

Today's text invites us to "stand fast" in the "true grace of God." Only you can decide whether God's grace is merely a favorite song or a conviction of the heart in which you will courageously stand.

Is there any other gospel that declares that I am God's precious child born by grace? Is there any other religion that clothes me in holiness as a gift of divine love? Is there any other faith that allows me to live confidently and without fear of the future? The answer is a resounding no.

I don't want a gospel that says, "Earn salvation for yourself." I don't want a religion in which obedience is motivated by fear to appease some "wrath of the gods." I don't want a faith that's uncertain about the future.

I want true grace—the unmerited favor of him who calls me out of darkness, who clothes me in holiness, who gives me confidence that his kingdom will never end. And I receive that grace with confidence, for I know that God gives it as his gift! I hope you know it too!

Dear Lord, as your child I love you; as your holy child I obey you; and as your living child I give testimony to your grace and glory by living your call. In Jesus, Amen.



A conversation about
faith, culture
and what it means to be a
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