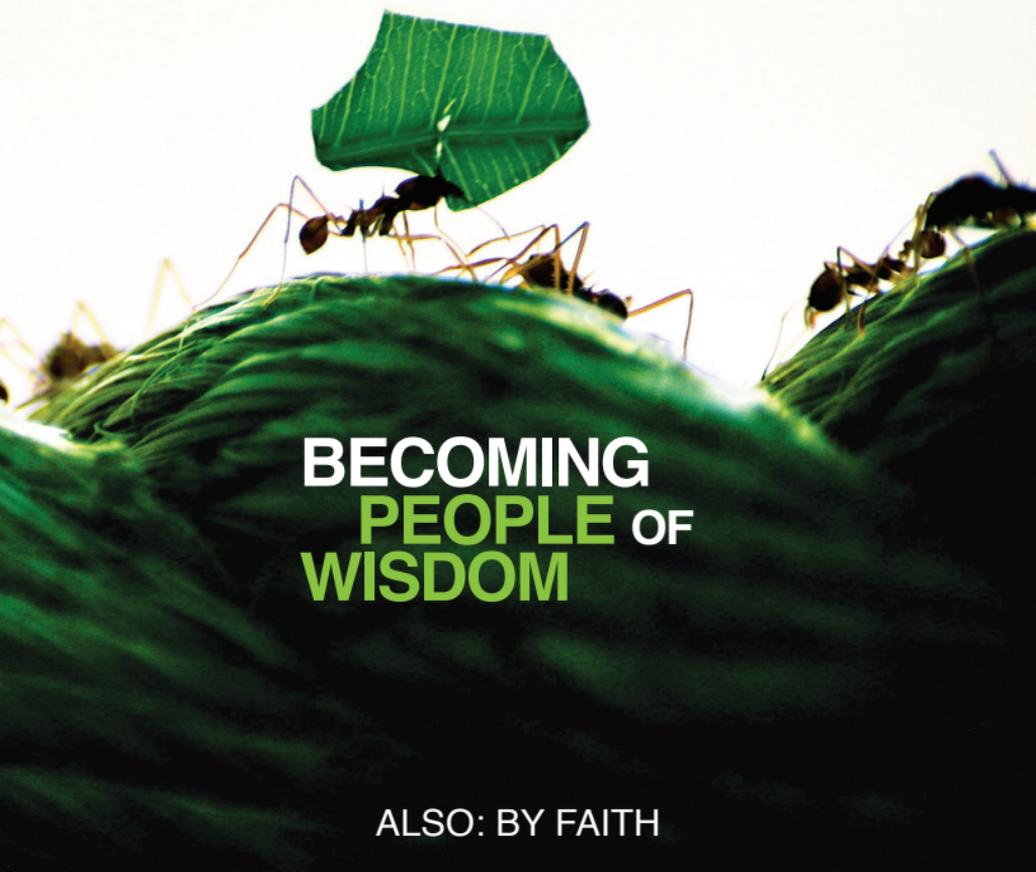


Today

Sept/Oct 2011

refresh, refocus, renew

A close-up photograph of several ants on a vibrant green leaf. One ant in the center is carrying a small, folded piece of leaf on its back, which serves as a shelter. The background is a bright, hazy white, creating a high-contrast scene. The ants are dark brown or black, and their legs are clearly visible as they move across the leaf's surface.

**BECOMING
PEOPLE OF
WISDOM**

ALSO: BY FAITH

Dear Friends,

The cover of *Today* illustrates one of the enduring images of wisdom—the diligent ant. The way of the ant challenges the deadly sin of sloth (check out Proverbs 6:6-11). In this edition of *Today* we're going to explore wisdom as a key ingredient in the Christian life. We will also explore another key ingredient—faith. It takes faith and wisdom to walk the way God intends for us.



All of us know people who have made wise decisions. But do all of these people have faith?

We also know people who have faith in God. But are they all wise?

The Word of God teaches us that true wisdom is rooted in true faith (see Proverbs 9:10; Psalm 111:10). It also teaches that godly wisdom can look foolish in the eyes of the world (see 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5). In our reflections here we'll see that the author of both faith and wisdom is God. And when God is at the center of our life, we really can live wisely and faithfully.

With this issue of *Today*, I invite you to explore new ways in which you can grow in wisdom and faith in your own life. And I pray that you'll discover powerful new ways to put your faith into wise action, to the glory of God.

In Christ's service,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bob Herzog".

Bob

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**“Becoming People
of Wisdom”**
Henry Kranenburg



“By Faith”
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re:FRAME MEDIA

this month

Becoming People of Wisdom

Henry Kranenburg

Wisdom is probably less sought after than it should be. That's why God gives us a book like Proverbs. In this unique Old Testament book of sayings about everyday life, God makes a clear and consistent call for his people to be pursuers of wisdom. At the same time, the Lord offers practical guidance for wise living.

In the New Testament, God gives us an even clearer understanding of wisdom. We discover that Jesus is the true Wisdom of God. Real wisdom comes from having incarnate Wisdom—Christ Jesus—in our hearts. A faith relationship with Jesus Christ is the key to living as wise people.

Proverbs teaches us the wisdom we are to put into practice as disciples of Christ. With the Spirit of Christ living in us, we can be increasingly filled with the wisdom we need to stand firm in God's way of living, and to face whatever life might bring.

Pastor Henry Kranenburg is a graduate of Calvin Theological Seminary and is currently serving as lead pastor at Immanuel Christian Reformed Church in Hamilton, Ontario. He previously served Bethel Christian Reformed Church in Brockville, Ontario. Henry is married to Marnie, and together they have four children. Henry is currently pursuing additional study in pastoral care and counseling.

WISE GUY

We preach Christ crucified . . . Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.
—1 Corinthians 1:23-24

While I don't want to be thought of as a "know-it-all," I definitely don't want to be a fool.

The word "fool" is used more than 80 times in the Bible. None of those mentions me by name, but I don't want the descriptions there to fit me either. I especially don't want to be listed as a fool in some record that God might keep.

Thankfully, Proverbs is a book that God gives to help us see what a fool is so that we can fight against becoming one. From the beginning it pits wisdom against foolishness. Sometimes the invitation is to embrace what is wise; other times the challenge is to fight what is foolish.

Proverbs is a collection of wisdom sayings that tell us the way things are. In this world there is wisdom, and there is

folly. Wisdom comes from living God's way, and folly comes from going our own way. God gives us Proverbs to help us see that our heart and character must be shaped by him, so that we can live wisely in all kinds of situations.

Ultimately, living wisely is about being Christlike: having the mind of Christ, who is perfectly wise.

The Bible calls Jesus "the wisdom of God." And a wisdom-shaped heart is one that has Christ in it. In that way, I want to be a "wise guy."

Almighty God, I don't want to be a fool. Please give me a heart of wisdom to live as your child, to grow to be like Christ. In his name, Amen.

ABOUT WISDOM

It is because of [God] that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God.
—1 Corinthians 1:30

It can be a little confusing to try to figure out how this business of getting wisdom and being wise works. There has to be a starting point. You have to *want* wisdom. The next step is to understand that if you want wisdom, you have to want Jesus.

Today's verses from Ephesians become clearer when connected to the verse from 1 Corinthians. God wants us to become mature, "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." So I need to want to grow mature in Christ. And the next question is: *How much* do I want to do that? How serious am I about growing in Christ—having a relationship with Christ that fills my whole life?

Sometimes it's a little disheartening to consider this. I may discover that the reason I am not growing in faith is not because God has abandoned me but

because I am holding back in my relationship with Christ. Do I really desire the wisdom that God wants for me? To not want wisdom is to not want God.

On the other hand, it's heartening to know that wisdom actually begins with God. He wants us to have wisdom, and he has created us with the desire for it. We need to cultivate that desire, and God helps us even in doing that, in Christ.

Are we ready to work with God, then, to grow in wisdom?

Lord, sometimes I want the results of wisdom without really wanting to work with you. Remind me that I need you in my being in order to grow in wisdom. Please increase my desire for you. Amen.

GOD'S DESIRE FOR ME

I keep asking that . . . God . . . may give you the Spirit of wisdom . . . so that you may know him better. —Ephesians 1:17

Growing in wisdom is about cultivating a character that is Christlike. If we want that wisdom, then the words of Ephesians 1 are a great discovery and encouragement.

What is striking about these verses is how they tell us we don't have to figure this all out on our own. It's not a project for which God gives us a textbook and tests us with a final exam at the end of life. God is not a "hands off" teacher.

In Ephesians 1 Paul explains that he prays for people to have wisdom, and he asks God to be involved in the process—because that is what God promises. Paul goes on to mention "the Spirit of wisdom," and he isn't asking only for the Spirit to *help* us; Paul asks that the Spirit of wisdom be *given* to us.

Why? So that we may *know* God better.

Suddenly this matter of gaining wisdom is not just about learning some Christian way of living. It is about an interactive God who wants to live in us and be part of our faith growth by becoming part of us.

We can simplify all that to this: God wants us to have wisdom. So we can make this prayer our own, saying, "I want to have the Spirit of wisdom and revelation because I want to know God better."

Heavenly Father, please give me "the Spirit of wisdom and revelation." Open the eyes of my heart to know the hope and power by which you want me to live. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

WISDOM STARTS WITH FEAR

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.
—Proverbs 9:10

To want wisdom is to want Jesus. But then the words “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” can be confusing.

The phrase “fear of the LORD” occurs often in Proverbs. Thankfully it doesn’t mean what we sometimes think it means—that you have to be scared of God. But it does mean that in our relationship with God there should be a healthy respect and awe.

What God is saying here has to do with honor, recognizing who God is and all he has done for us, because he loves us and is faithful.

Maybe it’s a bit like the way you might respect a guide leading you through a mountain pass that has all kinds of dangers and pitfalls and high cliffs. You honor the guide not simply because “he says so” but because

you know he is the one who will get you through. You have a healthy respect for someone who knows far more than you—and in whom you have to trust to get you where you need to go.

Exodus 20:20 puts it in perspective: “the fear of God will . . . keep you from sinning.”

If sin threatens to get me off the path, I want the “fear” that keeps me on it.

Lord, I confess that sometimes I resent your laws and confuse them with keeping me from enjoying freedom. Thank you that your love protects me. Please give me grace this day to follow you. Amen.

WORK DAY

Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!

—Proverbs 6:6

Ants are intriguing. They are busy; they can carry incredible weight for their size; and they work well in community. It can be fascinating to watch them work.

Every once in a while I hear someone say, “I love work; I could watch it all day.” We smile at that because we understand we were not created just to watch work. God created us to do things—and we can’t just narrow that down to having a job or career, or to pursuing hobbies, sports, or other interests. While all of these things can be good, we can misuse them if our focus shifts away from God. God’s intent is for us to use all the resources he has given us in order to serve him and honor him with our whole lives.

We were created to be people who can contribute something by playing a role in community.

Laziness or lack of involvement without reason just do not fit with what God has in mind. And when we don’t fit with what God has in mind, we lose something of what God intends us to be.

Our God is a worker. He created the universe, and through his Son the Lord is working to make all things new. We reflect God’s image as we use our hands and minds to answer God’s calling and do whatever our health and strength allow.

Thank God today for the work you can do.

Lord, sometimes we complain about the work we have to do, and sometimes we need rest. Help us to consider the ant and to honor you in all we do. Amen.

DESIRING HONEST FEEDBACK

A fool spurns a parent's discipline, but whoever heeds correction shows prudence.
—Proverbs 15:5

“Never argue with a fool. It’ll just drag you down to their level and make a fool of you.” I like the humorous truth of that. In other words, arguing with a fool is seldom productive. When we begin to engage with others in foolish ways, we start heading into fools’ territory—whether or not anyone else goes there with us. It’s a losing formula.

In Proverbs, God is not simply saying we should avoid fools. Sometimes we just can’t, and in Jesus’ name we need to interact with all kinds of people. God is saying that we should fight foolishness, especially when it begins to rise up in us.

To do that, we need help. And we receive help not only from God’s Word but also from others. God invites us to be part of a community of discerning people who know true wisdom in Christ. Such people

can help us when we face difficult decisions or when we are in relationships that challenge our own discernment. Wisdom means opening ourselves up to wise help so that we can stop any unperceived slide into foolishness.

I want the Bible to examine me as I read it (Hebrews 4:12), and I want people to critique me as I need it.

I want honest feedback because I want to be wise in thought, word, and deed.

Lord, give us wisdom that convicts us to avoid foolish actions in whatever we do. And help us to receive honest feedback as a wise way to grow. Amen.

GOOD ANGER

[Jesus] looked around at them in anger . . . deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts.
—Mark 3:5

I once read that anger is the emotion we most often experience. In a given week we won't typically experience the full range of human emotions—but it seems that almost all of us will get angry about something. No wonder so many verses in the Bible speak about anger.

Anger isn't necessarily a bad emotion. After all, we're told that God himself gets angry. God becomes angry at injustice, at mistreatment of people and the rest of his creation, and ultimately at all sinful behavior (rebellion against him). But that is good anger. (And God is also merciful, longsuffering, and forgiving. See Psalm 103:8-18.)

Good, healthy anger is not opposite to love. Good anger is motivated by love and compassion, and it energizes you to deal with wrong things that threaten someone or something you

care about. Good anger drives you to confront abuse, injustice, or disobedience that is hurting someone.

We need good anger because it gives us energy to fight for what is right and godly. In fact, that kind of energy is what helps me to follow Jesus, who got angry about some things too.

Sometimes I think we need more good anger if we are going to apply God's way of wisdom in our world.

Lord, most of us get angry sometimes. But we confess that often we don't get angry about some wrong things that need to be made right. Help us to fight the good fight, for wisdom's sake. Amen.

BAD ANGER

Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools.
—Ecclesiastes 7:9

I was talking with some children about anger, and we agreed that sometimes we get angry and sometimes people get angry with us. But calling someone a name like “You fool!” when we get angry is never a good thing.

Jesus’ point in Matthew 5 is not simply about name calling; it’s about relationships. The energy behind bad anger is not about loving others—it’s about loving oneself. It’s the kind of anger that cares more about venting or reacting or expressing one’s hurt, or diminishing someone else, than about serving the cause of a neighbor.

There’s a lot of bad anger around, and it’s the kind that leads to sin because it tends to unleash destructive energy. Sometimes our anger is simply about wanting someone else to feel pain because they have made us feel pain.

We have to ask ourselves, *What do we get angry about?* Do we get angry about the things that anger a just and holy God? And do we express that anger in healthy, constructive ways?

Most of us will get angry this week. But will that anger generate energy that breaks down relationships, rather than restoring them? If it does, we’re entering dangerous territory. That’s Jesus’ take on things—and Jesus was no fool.

Lord, your Word warns us that anger can give the devil a foothold. If there is any such foothold in my life, please help me remove it. If I have been wronged, help me to find a wise way toward restoration. Amen.

BEYOND ANGER

Mockers stir up a city, but the wise turn away anger.

—Proverbs 29:8

Wisdom does more than address our own anger, whether that anger is good or bad. Wisdom also addresses how we handle other people's anger. That's true whether people are angry at you, at someone else, or simply at the world.

Proverbs addresses this in a number of places and connects it with the spiritual exercise of patience. Proverbs 14:29 says, "Those who are patient have great understanding, but the quick-tempered display folly." The Bible talks about patient people as peacemakers. In fact, Jesus says peacemakers are truly blessed (Matthew 5:9).

Good anger is one thing—and it has to be handled with godly wisdom. But if we can turn away or defuse someone's bad anger, we can send ripples of calm into a community. Blessing others, we are also blessed.

In peacemaking, the place to start is with ourselves. How do we react when someone else is boiling over with bad anger? Do we jump in with our own angry reaction to their anger? If we push that person's buttons, insult him or her, or say something sharp because we're tired (even if we're right), and thus provoke someone's anger even further, we are flirting with foolishness—theirs and ours.

Wisdom means we know better because we love peace. With patience and love, we can aim for blessing others.

Lord, help me to turn away anger through patience and love. Give me wisdom not to provoke the anger of others and to help angry people find peace. In Christ, Amen.

DON'T GET "FOOLED"

"This is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."
—John 17:3

Have you ever heard of fool's gold? It's a shiny yellow mineral that looks a lot like gold—but is not. If you were a miner and you brought fool's gold to the market expecting to make a fortune, you would end up a fool who couldn't tell what has real value from what is worthless.

Of course, "fools" can be happy—at least for a while. Someone collecting fool's gold could spend days or even years collecting the stuff and think he was greatly successful. Reality would hit only when he went to market and learned that his work was for nothing, that the glitter had deceived him to pursue worthless trash.

It's not just miners who are looking for something of value. Part of every life consists of a pursuit of what really counts, what really matters. If you want to pursue what is of ultimate value, you

need to be clear about what you are looking for. God says it means looking for the one who is true Wisdom, the Word made flesh. Our search for the one who is Wisdom takes us to the Word of God, Jesus Christ, and to the community that is the body of Christ.

Tomorrow is Sunday, when churches of Christ everywhere will worship the Lord. Where will you be looking for the real thing? God promises that those who seek with all their heart will surely find.

We know, Lord, that we can keep busy "mining" for many things in life. Forgive our tendency to substitute lesser things for you. Help us to find wisdom. Amen.

A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIEND

The purposes of the human heart are deep waters, but those who have insight draw them out.
—Proverbs 20:5

A perceptive word from someone else can help us understand ourselves, even if it is a word of correction. It may come from someone we know personally, or it may come from a professional who is specially trained to offer us insight.

God also offers us counsel, and one of the tools he uses is the Bible. Our Scripture readings for today make clear that God knows us even better than we know ourselves, and that God interacts with us when we read his Word. In fact, while God does this, he is working on our soul.

Spending time in Scripture is more than just a way to get Bible knowledge. Reading God's Word unleashes into our being the power of God's Spirit. It's the way we get the Word working within us. It's the way we

discover what it means to have Jesus living in our heart.

Mysterious? Yes. But there's no mystery about how we can tap into this powerful spiritual dynamic. We simply need to take time to read the Bible, making sure we pray for God's Spirit to work in us as we read.

Maybe for some of us that can feel like a duty or chore. But if we're not taking time to be in God's Word, we're missing one of the most important pathways for pursuing wisdom. That will make a difference in how we sense the presence of God in our life.

Lord, please search me as I read your Word today, direct and correct my thoughts and attitudes, and lead me in the way of full life with you. Amen.

WORDS AND SILENCE

Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent, and discerning if they hold their tongues.
—Proverbs 17:28

Karl Kraus, a writer and journalist, said, “It is better not to express what one means, than to express what one does not mean.” Kraus echoes the words of our text from Proverbs. Silence is sometimes the best course of action. Silence can keep us from looking like a fool.

What Proverbs is pointing to is that using words can be tricky, regardless of how wise we are. We can use words thoughtlessly. They can cause much damage, some of which can't be undone. Words demand our utmost care.

Ephesians 4:29 indicates that I have a responsibility for what people hear in my words.

It's not enough for me just to say what I think in order to get it off my chest. I need to say it in a way that is helpful for oth-

ers, and in a way that they can understand. If I am not ready for that, then maybe I should say less and listen more.

Jesus says in Matthew 12:37, “By your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.” That's because words are not just about me. They are about my relationship with others.

Sometimes for the sake of relationship it is wisest just to keep quiet. I need to be reminded of that from time to time.

Lord, we know how words can make a difference in the way people see us. I'm sorry for the ways I have misused words to hurt rather than build relationships. Help me to use words wisely. Amen.

PLANNING AND ADVICE

The way of fools seems right to them, but the wise listen to advice.

—Proverbs 12:15

We have to be careful with a proverb like this. Just surrounding myself with advisers doesn't make me wise. Foolish talk doesn't become wisdom just because my favorite counselors agree. A wise person picks advisers carefully. Wisdom comes from the mouth of the wise.

But this proverb gets at a deeper issue. All of us tend to want to have things our own way because that seems right to us. So we are prone to seek out people who agree with our point of view. After all, who wants to be told they are wrong?

But such action risks foolishness. All of us have limited vision. None of us can evaluate fully every possibility. Wise people don't just want to get their way. Wise people want to act wisely. That means getting advice from others who can help them see clearly. Wise advisers will say

what a person needs to hear—even when they know the person may at first disagree.

If I refuse to ask for the input of people who love me and may know something about me or my planning, then I need to read today's verses again. That doesn't mean I need always to do what others say. But it does mean I will pay attention.

I thank God for people who speak from hearts that love God and embrace his true wisdom.

Lord, thank you for people you have given me on my life's journey. Please use them to help me see what I need to see, and give me wisdom to listen. Amen.

MY PLANS AND GOD

Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.
—Proverbs 27:1

I agree that I “do not know what a day may bring.” The problem is that I don’t often keep this in mind as I go about my day. My schedule is filled with plans and appointments that usually work out pretty much as I intended. If they don’t, I figure I must have put too much in or didn’t leave enough margin for the unexpected. That suggests I am not really able to plan my day as much as I think I can. I just don’t want to admit it.

The words of James and Proverbs call us to think about our limited ability to control our lives. I can plan carefully and even wisely and with the good advice of others, but I am not in command of my life the way I often might think. My life could be over tomorrow—or even today. So could yours.

On the other hand, God knows what tomorrow will bring.

In fact, God ordained all of our days before one of them came to be (Psalm 139:16). That means it’s not enough to listen to wisdom from family and friends. We need to listen to God. We need to pray, and in prayer we can learn to hear what God may say to us.

Wise people reflect on and live by the reality of planning and doing in cooperation with the Lord’s will. They understand Proverbs 19:21: “Many are the plans in a human heart, but it is the LORD’S purpose that prevails.”

Lord, I know I don’t control tomorrow, and I want to reflect on that enough to gain a heart of wisdom. Teach me to surrender all my plans to line up with your will. Amen.

SELF-DISCIPLINE

As a dog returns to its vomit, so fools repeat their folly.

—Proverbs 26:11

A speaker at a Promise Keepers conference referred to this proverb. The picture here is visually unpleasant—and that's saying it nicely. My dog has confirmed for me the first part of this proverb, but God's Word for us has to do with the second part. If you or I keep returning to our foolishness, we will keep doing things that we shouldn't do.

All of us have habits. Some of them help us live wisely, and some do not. Some can be downright destructive and sinful. God's call to a disciplined life means I need to find ways to break away from bad habits that undermine my discipleship. I need to turn away from foolish patterns that keep tempting me.

Sheer willpower always fails us. Our return to "vomit" is almost instinctive. That's when we realize we need to clean up not just individual acts but a whole

pattern of living. The conference speaker was addressing the problem of pornography and its easy access through the Internet. But we can apply this proverb to a lot of sinful things.

Jesus says, "If your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off" (Matthew 5:30). He didn't mean that literally, but he did mean that it can take drastic action to walk away from our folly. Sometimes when the garbage is too tempting, that's what wisdom demands.

Lord, thank you for habits of self-discipline that we have already learned. Please give us the strength and wisdom to get rid of our garbage and to cultivate additional good habits. In Jesus, Amen.

DRINKING

Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise.
—Proverbs 20:1

Okay, Proverbs is talking about *excessive* drinking, right? Or being *led astray* by wine or beer. So as long as I'm not excessive or led astray, it's okay, right?

Besides, the psalmist says that God made wine to gladden the heart (Psalm 104:15). And Jesus made gallons of wine for a wedding (John 2:1-10), and Paul told Timothy (a pastor) to have some wine to help settle his stomach (1 Timothy 5:23).

We can answer yes to all of the above, but our text still speaks a healthy warning.

Frankly, Proverbs doesn't have many positive things to say about drinking. The writer wants us to take its dangers seriously.

It's easy to buy into a culture that says drinking will help you fit in, feel less stressed, and attract better-looking partners. It's

not hard to close our eyes to the deceptions.

Alcohol can affect how we live out our values. It can lead to loose words, hurtful actions, dangerous driving, and broken relationships. When it takes control of our lives, it "bites like a snake and poisons like a viper."

Wisdom includes being honest. God's Word for you today may be to look closely at how you or someone you care about is handling alcohol. It's foolish to play with vipers.

Lord, we understand that alcohol itself is not evil, but misusing it can bring so much trouble. Thank you for people who help with healing when it is needed. Help us to live wisely so as not to need that healing. Amen.

SELF-CONTROL

Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control.
—Proverbs 25:28

When we struggle with bad habits and sinful weaknesses, we need to know that self-control is possible. But self-control that really works is not driven by our willpower. It's guided by "our great God and Savior," who gives us a new self in place of our old sinful self (see Ephesians 2:4-5; 4:17-5:20). That's why self-control is described as part of the "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 5:22-23. In Christ, we are given a new, Spirit-guided self that can truly help us overcome our sinful weaknesses.

God wants us to have new life, guided by his Spirit, so that sin will not hurt us or our relationships with him and others. The Spirit leads us to grow in prayer (conversation with God) and Bible reading (learning from his Word) and worship (praising and thanking God and hearing his Word). And all of this hap-

pens best in community with other Christians (the church of Christ, our Savior, who gave himself to purify us).

The community that God gives us is also a great help for our self-control. Without it, we're like a vulnerable city that can be attacked and destroyed. Our walls aren't always strong enough if we are the only ones building them. With a Spirit-led community that holds us accountable, we can fight better than we could alone.

Tomorrow is community day. Can you join with Spirit-led believers to worship the God who gives us new life and self-control?

Thank you, Lord, for new life that helps us grow closer to you, and together, in wisdom. Amen.

FULL-CIRCLE GENEROSITY

A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.
—Proverbs 11:25

I have a copy of a cartoon in which a boy says to his father, “The teacher told us a proverb that says a fool and his money are soon parted. How did they get together in the first place?” Good question.

The teacher’s proverb isn’t from the Bible, but it contains some folk wisdom. It suggests that if I tend to spend my money as fast as I get it—or even before I get it—I may be in fools’ territory. It is wise to plan and save where we can.

But there is another side to managing our finances.

Proverbs 11:25 tells us that hanging on to everything for ourselves is not wise either.

In fact, investing all I have into me and my future misses out on the blessing God intends for me. Generosity brings with it a

blessing that I can never get by keeping everything for myself.

Please understand: God doesn’t want us to be generous simply as a way to get more. He wants us to reflect his generosity in our own lives. God wants us to share his heart of generosity.

The truth is, at the heart of generous stewardship is a relationship with God that helps me to give to others.

If I have received wisdom, I want to refresh others with the same kind of generosity.

Dear Jesus, you gave your life so that we could have you. We sometimes lose sight of your generosity and the circle of giving that it intends. Guide us to refresh others with the same spirit. Amen.

GOOD THINGS DON'T COME CHEAP

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”
—Matthew 22:37

On a brochure I saw these words: “If I’m really a Christian . . . then why isn’t Jesus more real in my life?” If you have ever wondered about that, you should know that you aren’t the first and you won’t be the last. Even writers of the Bible wrestled with this question.

There are different reasons, of course, why people might sometimes feel that way. But one place to start in reflecting on this is to recognize that God desires depth in his people. Not necessarily intellectual depth or all kinds of biblical knowledge—though these things are good—but depth in relationship with God, as opposed to shallowness.

Proverbs 2 talks about *accepting* and *storing up* and *turning our ear* and *applying our heart* and *calling out for insight* and *crying aloud for understanding* and *look-*

ing and *searching*. It uses action words like these to describe what we should be doing in our pursuit of wisdom.

Bottom line? We have to want it. We have to be committed to going after wisdom.

It will take work, and it will take your heart. But, without that, Jesus—and wisdom—won’t seem real.

It makes me want to dig a little deeper, again.

Father God, I know that believing you exist is not enough. Help me not just to affirm certain truths or wrestle with what they mean—but to desire you, and to want the wisdom you have for me in Christ. Amen.

A LITTLE HELP FOR MY FRIENDS

Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up.

—Proverbs 12:25

Proverbs speaks often about how a kind word can lift our spirit. If you have a friend who does this for you, or if people have offered a kind word at the right time in your journey, you know the value of this proverb. It's one way in which an anxious heart can lose some weight.

Most of us know this already. In fact, many of us quickly feel troubled when we think there might be very few people who would be such a friend to us.

Yet if I know that, there is a simple question I should ask myself: *To whom am I that kind of friend?*

To whose anxious heart do I listen and offer a word of encouragement? To whom do I go to see how they are doing (and not simply wait for them to come to me)? If all of us waited for someone else to be that kind of

friend, none of us would ever receive the kind word Proverbs talks about.

And you know what is interesting? The more we step out to be that kind of person for someone else—as hard as it may be, given the weight of our own hearts—the more we feel connected to Jesus, who always reached out to others. And that makes sense, for it's the way of wisdom.

Now, to do it

Lord, I know the value of kind encouragement for my soul. Thank you for times when I have seen you in that. Please help me to offer kindness and encouragement to someone today, in your name. Amen.

TONGUE CONTROL

The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.
—Proverbs 12:18

Someone once told me that in addition to a gun registry, we should have a tongue registry. That way we could exercise “tongue control” and not have people go “shooting off their mouths.” We’ve all experienced damage from an uncontrolled tongue.

God intends for us to use our speech wisely. The answer isn’t found in becoming tongue-tied and saying nothing. God gave us the gift of speech for a good reason. The second part of our proverb for today reveals that God wants us to use the tongue as a tool, not as a weapon.

God intends that we use our tongue to communicate with others and build relationships. When something isn’t going right in a relationship, God intends for us to use our tongue to build bridges of understanding. Words aren’t meant to

pierce and destroy; they are meant to be vehicles of truth, reconciliation, and healing.

If we want to evaluate the quality of our speech, we can do no better than to think of God’s ultimate speech to us, in Jesus.

Do our words measure up to the character of Christ? With the Spirit of Christ working in us and shaping us, we know we will become more Christlike (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Wise people take note, and then they take time to think before they speak.

Thank you, God, for the gift of your words, and for the gift of the Word made flesh. Knowing the power of words, help me to choose my words in line with your will. Amen.

WORDS OF WISDOM

From the fruit of their lips people are filled with good things, and the work of their hands brings them reward. —Proverbs 12:14

This proverb is quite striking. It states that we will be filled (or satisfied) with good things (blessings) by the fruit of our lips (things we say). Of course, “the fruit” mentioned here must be good. (Bad fruit is simply garbage.) So *the fruit of our lips* would refer to good, helpful, upbuilding things that we say. In other words, this fruit would be wise counsel—words of wisdom.

God chose to reveal himself to us in words: words spoken to Adam and Eve in the garden, words spoken through the prophets, words recorded in the Bible. Ultimately God spoke in Jesus, the Word made flesh. Words are part of how God comes to us, and words are part of how we connect to God and to each other.

So it’s important to use words wisely. We need to take care that what we say resonates with

the words and wisdom of God. And when we do, people and communities will be blessed, and that will result in blessing for us, which satisfies the heart.

This is similar to enjoying the benefits and blessings of doing good work. Whether we have used our hands to make a masterpiece of art, to serve others in our work, or to clean up our home or yard—if we have done it to glorify God (Colossians 3:17), we are blessed in the work we have done. And the results satisfy our hearts.

What will the fruit of your lips be today—a word that helps someone grow closer to God?

We know, Lord, that our words affect others. As I speak today, may my words reflect your heart. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP

Those who are kind to the poor lend to the LORD, and he will reward them for what they have done. —Proverbs 19:17

Too often we think first about ourselves, but Jesus teaches that we need to think and care about others—and that when we serve them, we are serving him. Our proverb for today echoes this eye-opening teaching.

But don't we often simply ignore others in need and look down on them? Or when we compare ourselves to others, don't we tend to think we're the ones who have too little?

As Jesus reminds us, there are people in this world—and very possibly in our neighborhood or at least nearby—who don't know where their food will come from today, or who don't have access to health care, clean water, or adequate education. The list could go on and on.

Like Jesus, today's proverb leads me to consider what I have done for the poor lately, and then it

goes a little further. When we give to the poor, it's like lending to the Lord. Looking into their faces is like looking into the face of Jesus.

So what have we given to God recently?

God wants us to take this challenge seriously, as seriously as we receive his kindness and bounty.

We practice wisdom when we handle our resources the way Jesus would have us do.

"For health and strength and daily food, we give you thanks, O Lord." As we receive your gifts with open hearts, give us wise kindness to share with others in need. In Jesus' name, Amen.

PRIDE

[The Lord] mocks proud mockers but shows favor to the humble and oppressed.
—Proverbs 3:34

Pride. Some say it was the root of Adam and Eve's sin. Pride led them to think they knew better than God, and to think they could handle the risk of going their own way. So they did, and they discovered they couldn't handle it at all. But then it was too late.

Pride is also what Jesus is talking about in the parable in Luke 18. It is wonderful, of course, that people pray. But the praying Pharisee is self-absorbed, seeing himself only in comparison to other people, especially those whom he judged to be worse than himself. Pride tends to want to know how we are doing compared to others, and it thrives on the foolish idea that we are better in some way. Pride depends on comparison to shape identity.

Humility doesn't compare us to others. It calls us to see

ourselves in the light of God's standards. Humility leads us to realize how much we need God, and it understands that our need is no less than anyone else's. Humility desires that we see ourselves as God sees us.

That's wise because it's real. Humility exposes who we are, and at the same time it reveals our need for the Savior whose very life exemplified humility. A close relationship with Jesus helps us crucify our pride and find the freeing power of true humility.

Lord, I don't want to be proud. I don't want false humility or wounded self-esteem either. Please help me to see myself as you see me, so that I can see your grace better. Thank you. Amen.

ENVY

A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.

—Proverbs 14:30

When you compare yourself to others and decide that you don't measure up, you can easily fall into envy. And that can make you rotten inside.

Envy is not the same as jealousy, in which a person has no tolerance for rivalry or unfaithfulness. In fact, I can be rightly jealous for my wife's love, just as God is rightly jealous for the faithfulness we owe him. But not all jealousy is right.

Envy comes in when we feel we have a right to something that someone else has—and we feel they shouldn't have it at all. Envy has led people to steal or kill to make sure the thing they wanted was not enjoyed by someone else.

Saul was envious of David. David was more successful, and he received more praise. When that happened, Saul—who had his

own successes—no longer heard the songs sung for him, but only the songs sung for David. And it made him rot on the inside.

I know some envious people. They have a hard time praising others and hearing praise for those they envy. In the end, it can hurt them more than anyone else, for it can rot the soul.

In contrast with envy, wisdom calls us to rejoice in the good that others do, and to praise God for the blessings and gifts he provides others.

Lord, sometimes I fall into envy when I make comparisons. Help me to be joyful about the gifts you give to others, and to appreciate all you have given me. Guide me to serve you faithfully. In Jesus' name, Amen.

HAUGHTY EYES

Haughty eyes and a proud heart . . . produce sin.

—Proverbs 21:4

Proverbs has a lot to say about eyes, and it links them here to a proud heart. “Haughty eyes,” says the writer, “produce sin.” So if you want wisdom, you don’t want haughty eyes.

The word *haughty* comes from an old Anglo-French word, *haut*, which means “high,” and which comes from the Latin word *altus*, from which we get our word *altitude*. Putting all that together, we find that haughty eyes are the kind of eyes that look down at other people, as if the one looking down is “higher up” than others.

At the heart of this again is the problem of comparing—we don’t just look down, we look *down at other people* as if they are lower or lesser than we are.

Somehow we feel we need to prove that we are worth something, if for no other rea-

son than to make sure we can identify someone who is worth less than we are. But, of course, that’s foolish. It leads to hurting others as well as ourselves.

God says, “Don’t look down, look up. You are so worthwhile to me that I gave my Son so that I could have you for my children.” God doesn’t do this with haughty eyes; he does it with eyes of love. Our desperate need became his loving opportunity. Wisdom means we want to do the same with others because we have seen that look of love from God in Christ.

Thank you, Father, for your love, which reaches out to me in my need. Please help me to see others with your eyes of love, and to share your love with them. Amen.

HONORING MARRIAGE

Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned?
—Proverbs 6:27

As Proverbs offers us insights about wisdom in everyday life, it's not surprising to hear something about marriage, or at least about faithfulness in marriage.

What's tough about today's verses is that they sound so negative. The prominent message seems less about building a good marriage than about pointing out the dangers of wrecking one through adultery. And the words are strong and consistent: don't go outside the boundaries of what God has set. Don't flirt with behaviors that move you in that direction.

This message is just as important today as when it was first written. There is a reason why advertisers appeal to sexuality to sell their products. Not only does it fascinate, but the excitement and intimacy attached to sex are naturally appealing. By God's design, we long for in-

timacy. But in the end we get burned if we look for it in ways that cannot deliver. And nowhere is that more important than when it comes to marriage and family, because when trust is broken there, the damage often cannot be repaired.

These words aren't just for married people. They are for everyone, because wise family life is more than just avoiding adultery. It's about doing all we can to protect God's intention for family. And that takes a community.

Lord, you have given marriage as a gift. Help me to honor your intentions about love and sex and trust and vows, for the good of all in my community. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

FROM THE INSIDE OUT

The human spirit can endure in sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear?
—Proverbs 18:14

We all have a heart. We rarely think of the fact that it pumps about 100,000 times each day and pushes nourishment through some 60,000 miles (96,500 km) of veins, arteries and capillaries—it just keeps going. But when our heart isn't well, we know we are in trouble.

In Proverbs, the “human spirit” refers to the “heart” of our personality, the seat of our emotions, the part of us that reveals our character, passions, preferences, and other aspects of who we are.

Most of us tend to take our spirit, our “heart,” for granted, until it is wounded or crushed. When that happens, we can get very troubled with anxiety, feelings of insecurity, and doubt. Proverbs points out that when our spirit is strong, we can handle a lot of adversity. But when

our spirit is crushed, life can become almost unbearable.

Wisdom calls us to understand that we live from the inside out. We often reverse that, believing that if our circumstances (money, job, clothes, and so on) were better, then we would be happier on the inside. But it's a fool's game to attempt shaping our spirit from the outside.

So when I look at my life—what I do, where I focus my thoughts, and what I talk about with others—where am I investing more: in my inner spirit or in the outer things of life?

Lord God, by your Spirit, “create in me a pure heart . . . and renew a steadfast spirit within me.” Help me to focus on developing a wise spirit that honors you. In Jesus, Amen.

AN INSIDE JOB

I pray that . . . [the Father] may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being . . . —Ephesians 3:16-17

How do I invest in my spirit?
How do I live more wisely from the heart of my being?

Throughout the Bible we are reminded of the call to pay attention to our inner life. Consider the surprise of David's family when David was anointed to be king, even though he wasn't as impressive as his brothers. The Lord had said, "People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). Or consider Jesus' words that we need to be more concerned with what can happen to our soul than what can happen to our body (Luke 12:4-7).

Today's verses bring the wisdom of Proverbs into our life of prayer. Paul could have prayed for all kinds of external things, including freedom from his prison cell (see Ephesians 6:20). But instead he prays that God will

strengthen his readers with power in their "inner being," with the goal that Christ will live in their hearts. When we have God's strength "on the inside," we can handle whatever life throws our way "on the outside."

That's what I want. I want to be wise, live wise, and have the person of wisdom in me. So in the morning when I get up, I pray this prayer of Paul, on my knees. It's a way to remind myself about priorities. And it's especially a way to ask God for his help in making my life "an inside job."

Father, I pray that you will strengthen me with power through your Spirit in my inner being, so that Christ may dwell in my heart through faith. In Jesus' name, Amen.

ABOVE ALL ELSE

Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.
—Proverbs 4:23

Today brings us to the end of our study of Proverbs and its theme of wisdom. While there may be some sayings that stick with us more than others, our goal hasn't merely been to read some witty words. We've pursued wisdom in order to shape our hearts and mold our characters so that we can think and act wisely for good in this world. Wisdom is really about becoming like Christ.

In Scripture, the heart is the vital center of our moral, spiritual, and intellectual life. Our heart is the expression of our core identity. Everything flows from our heart. So if that is where Christ dwells and if that is what we are shaping with wisdom—then protecting our heart becomes a high priority.

We could try to guard our heart by shielding it from bad influences, but there is a more posi-

tive way to strengthen our heart. Jesus reminds us that beyond merely obeying commands is God's call to love. The final purpose of our heart is to show love for God and others. The best way to protect our heart is to make sure that it is filled with love for God. And that happens when Wisdom resides there, when the Spirit of Christ lives within us. Becoming people of wisdom is about becoming people who reflect the character of Jesus.

May God bless your journey as you pursue the wisdom he wants you to have.

Lord Jesus, in a world full of distractions, help me guard my heart. May it be the wellspring of love for you and your kingdom in every part of my life. In your name I pray. Amen.

this month

By Faith

Jul Medenblik

How are we to endure troubles? Move through grief? Forgive others? Make an impact for good on the people around us? In short, how are we to face all that life throws at us? The Bible offers a key insight into such questions when it tells us that God's disciples live "by faith." This month we'll discover how God used ordinary but faith-filled people for his extraordinary purposes. Let's explore some Old and New Testament passages, and in so doing we'll be encouraged to live *by faith* today!

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BY FAITH

Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.

—Hebrews 11:1-2

This month we take a journey of discovery by looking at some of the Bible's "heroes of faith." As we begin, we should note that today's reading is marked by a repeated phrase of introduction: "By faith. . . ." The author of the book of Hebrews does not want any confusion of focus. Many of the people he identifies are so well known that our focus can quickly turn to those people and their memorable words or actions. But the writer wants us to know that it is not people but God who is great.

By faith in God, an adventure begins for ordinary people who are equipped by God for his extraordinary purposes. Can we identify with this type of faith? The atmosphere of faith-filled living overflows with hope and certainty. Hope looks ahead to the fulfillment of God's prom-

ises, and certainty stems from the security of God's love and faithfulness. By faith we trust in the one true God alone.

As we journey together this month, we'll see that "faith history" spans the centuries. But as we enter into "what the ancients were commended for," we must avoid thinking that these stories are simply for historical review. Each story challenges us to understand that life *by faith* is available for all who believe today, for all who hope in God and follow his call in an uncertain world.

God of time and eternity, thank you for inviting us to be yours through the adventure of faith. May our hope and certainty rest in you alone. Amen.

ORDINARY PEOPLE—EXTRAORDINARY GOD

I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson . . . David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms. . . .
—Hebrews 11:32-33

Some of the names in Hebrews 11 are well known. Others are not. But all are the names of believers through whom God worked to keep his promises.

As we ponder Hebrews 11, which is sometimes described as the Bible's chapter on "heroes of faith," we should note that this chapter never uses the word *hero*. It simply lists the names of ordinary people whom God used for extraordinary purposes.

For the past sixteen years, I have had the privilege of pastoring the same church family. In that family I have known ordinary people who are "heroes of faith."

As I write this devotional piece, a father of five is facing life without his beloved wife and best friend because of her death. Amy's faith saw her

through nine years of battling cancer that ultimately affected her breathing. She took her last earthly breath on Christmas morning.

Amy's husband has shared with me that as he and his children face the future, it is through faith that they will become "more than conquerors" (see Romans 8:35-39).

Faith is something that tethers us to God and pulls us forward—step by step and day by day.

Dear God, I am an ordinary person—you know that. I desire to be used by you for your purposes. Empty my life so that you may fill it with your gifts, including the gift of faith. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WHO GETS THE CREDIT?

Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go."
—Judges 4:8

The Book of Judges has a certain rhythm. People who were close to God would fall away from him. Then trouble would enter their life, so they'd cry out to God. God would answer their cries and deliver them. Then, after a time, the cycle would begin again.

But in that cycle God provided leaders. One such leader was Deborah, a prophetess and a judge. She was an instrument of God who called for Barak to follow a plan laid out by God to give victory over the enemy.

But Barak said he would not carry out Deborah's request unless she, as God's spokesperson, went with him. Deborah noted that if she went with him, the honor would not be his, for God would deliver the enemy "into the hands of a woman." Barak's response, in effect, was "So what?"

Barak did not fuss about who got the credit or honor; he only wanted to make sure God's prophet—and thus God—would be with him.

Maybe you have heard that a team can accomplish a great deal if its members don't care who gets the credit. The same can be said for the church. If individual church members are looking for credit or honor, then the glory of God is not central and the result is a church that is weaker, not stronger. Heroes of faith grow by giving credit to God.

Dear God, forgive me when I seek to put myself first. Help me to point others to you—in word and deed—day by day. May the name of Jesus be lifted up, I pray. Amen.

A HERO IN HIDING?

The angel of the LORD came . . . where . . . Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress . . .
—Judges 6:11

Where do we find heroes? We might try to find them in sports, movies, television, or the news. But what about in a winepress?

Gideon was threshing wheat in a most unlikely place. People usually separated wheat from chaff out in the open air so that breezes could blow the unwanted chaff away. But Gideon did not live in a “usual” time.

Israel had again fallen away from allegiance to God. So God was using the Midianites as an instrument of punishment. The Midianites plundered Israel and ravaged the land, destroying the crops and harvests. As a result, farmers threshed grain in places sheltered from an open view—in a winepress, for instance. It was a time of fear, and Gideon was a fearful man.

Sometimes people think heroes of faith have no fear, but that’s

not true. Following God is often a journey that begins with an encounter in which God calls the fearful away from their fears. Do you hear the irony in God’s message to Gideon through his angel? “The LORD is with you, mighty warrior.”

How can we face our fears and join the journey of faith? By remembering that we are not alone. The Lord is with each one of us. Still today God desires to give that same message to us as ordinary people whom he calls for his extraordinary purposes.

Dear God, you know my fears. Help me to face them by trusting in your forgiveness, presence, and provision through Jesus—Immanuel (“God with us”). Amen.

WHY ARE YOU CALLING ME?

"How can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family."
—Judges 6:15

An angel appears to Gideon, but that is not enough. An angel tells Gideon that God sees him as a "mighty warrior," but that is not enough. Gideon, like so many before him and so many after him, protests that he is not qualified. In effect, Gideon says that God must be making a mistake in calling him.

But God doesn't give up. In response to Gideon's objections, God promises, "I will be with you." That should have been enough, right? But not for Gideon—and sometimes not for us as well.

Gideon asks for a sign that it is really the Lord who calls him. Gideon will also ask for additional signs (Judges 6:20-24, 36-40). And, graciously, God does not turn away.

As he goes to prepare an offering and set it before the Lord,

Gideon receives this wonderful promise: "I will wait until you return."

God waits for Gideon, and he waits for us. In what is often called the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), Jesus gives us a picture of God as a waiting Father. God's patience toward us shapes us on our journey of faith.

Gideon prepared an offering to honor God and to ask for a sign. What can you offer the Lord, who waits for you?

Waiting Father, help me to know that my faith remains small unless I bring an offering of my heart. Help me also to be amazed at your patience with my small, sometimes stumbling steps in this journey of faith. Amen.

TOO MANY?

The LORD said to Gideon, "You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands, or Israel would boast against me, 'My own strength has saved me.'"
—Judges 7:2

Gideon is now prepared to take up his position as leader of Israel's troops against Midian. One of the ways we usually identify leaders is by the number of their followers. Gideon has been able to raise an army of 32,000. As Gideon surveyed his troops, he must have been tempted to be impressed by his own ability and strength.

But to yield to that temptation would have betrayed what it means to be a hero of faith. A hero of faith trusts God, not oneself. And to make that clear, God began to whittle away at the size of Gideon's army. Everyone needed to see that it was not Gideon's army that would bring victory, but God's unfailing strength.

Gideon saw his army dwindle from 32,000 to a mere 300. But God provided encouragement to these 300 by letting them

overhear a dream of someone in the Midianite camp. With God's encouragement and a unique military strategy, the enemy was confused. God brought about the victory.

This story can also help us see that God takes care not only of the "big" concerns in our life but also of the "little" things. We often think we're in control of everyday details, but then we miss seeing how God provides and leads even in the ordinary things of life. Heroes of faith are led by God in all they do, and by no one else.

Dear God, may I trust in your provision rather than my own abilities. When I am prideful of my gifts, remind me that they come from your hand. Keep me close to you. Amen.

HOW DO YOU JUDGE A HERO?

Samson prayed . . . "Sovereign LORD, remember me. Please, God, strengthen me just once more . . ."
—Judges 16:28

Samson is listed as a person of faith in Hebrews 11:32. And yet his lifestyle may cause us to wonder.

Samson had amazing strength from God, but he seemed often to abuse it for his own sport. From birth he had been dedicated to serve God, but Samson showed disrespect for all kinds of God's laws for his people. Eventually he was betrayed into the hands of his enemies by Delilah, a woman he was living with. His great strength left him, and they made him a prisoner. They gouged out his eyes and put him to work grinding grain. (See Judges 13-16.)

Do we feel much sympathy for someone like that? Isn't it tempting to say he deserved what he got?

Though Samson couldn't see anymore, we might say that at

the end of his life his real sight was restored.

Samson's life was marked not by prayer but by physical, brute strength. Yet in the last moment of his life, he turned to God in prayer and asked God to remember him. God answered his prayer by giving him great strength again. And Samson's last act as a leader of Israel was marked by a victory that cost him his life. Samson sacrificed his life for God's people. Maybe that's why he is remembered in Hebrews 11.

Dear God, may Samson's life remind me that in spite of what I have done, you can still redeem me. May I be willing to sacrifice for you as you have done for me through Jesus, your Son. Amen.

TROUBLES AND BLESSINGS

Naomi said . . . “Go back, each of you May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness” —Ruth 1:8

Because of a famine, Naomi left home with her husband and two sons in search of food and a better future. But then Naomi's husband died. Her two sons married, but they also died.

When the famine ended back home in Israel, Naomi returned, but she told people not to call her Naomi anymore. “Call me Mara,” she said—which means “bitter.”

Yet in the midst of her troubles, Naomi still found the faith to wrestle with God and ask him to bless her daughters-in-law.

Can a person in trouble still be a blessing to others? Absolutely. I have seen people in times of trouble deepen their faith by aiming to continue to help others. I have seen people's faith strengthened when they moved from focusing on their own con-

cerns to giving of themselves to others, for Jesus' sake.

Today you may find yourself questioning God and even wrestling with him. In this kind of struggle, I invite you to hear Naomi's trust in God and her blessing of others. She knew that her daughters-in-law had suffered as well. She did not add to their suffering. In the midst of a tearful separation, she prayed for them. Naomi was on a journey of faith—one in which her tears accompanied her walk with God.

Dear God, today some of us are really struggling. May we hear from you even through our tears. Give us eyes to see others and to bless them even as we struggle. And please grant us peace. Amen.

HEROES NEED ONE OTHER

"Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God." —Ruth 1:16

Naomi has urged her two daughters-in-law to return to their homes. In the middle of a circle of tears, Orpah says goodbye and turns toward home. At the same time, Ruth clings to Naomi and refuses to turn away, promising to go where Naomi goes and to trust in her God.

People in sorrow and loss sometimes just want to be alone. They may even have a view that everyone would be better off if they just were not around. But isolation can be a tool of Satan that leads to even more trouble and sorrow.

Naomi is wrestling with God, but she will not wrestle alone. God doesn't mean for the journey of faith to be a solitary walk. Even Jesus wanted his disciples with him when he struggled in the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-34).

As Naomi returns home, she says to others, "I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty." Sorrow and loss can distort our view of the world and even our view of God. Naomi is not really returning empty.

The harvest time is just beginning, and God has given Naomi a gift in calling Ruth to stand by her side. In the midst of loss, God provides Naomi a family.

Dear God, help me to see today anyone who needs me to stand by their side. May you move me from my comfort zone to be of comfort to another. May the Comforter direct me, I pray. Amen.

GOD AT WORK

Ruth . . . said . . . "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor." —Ruth 2:2

When you don't have food, you search for it. Ruth is going to glean the fields to find leftover grain, and God is also at work—not only to help her find leftovers but to give a harvest of blessing.

Boaz is a distant relative to Naomi—and much more. God is about to use an ordinary person for his extraordinary purposes again. Through the kindness of Boaz, Ruth is allowed to glean until the harvest is finished. This journey is marked by the generosity and hospitality Boaz demonstrates in his work life and by the way he runs his farming business.

Today many of us will return to work after a weekend. Whether we work at an office, job site, factory, school, or elsewhere, we will enter into the world of others as we get back to work. How we do our work will affect how others see the God we claim to serve.

Sadly, the praise that we give God on Sunday can be blemished by our words and actions on Monday. A hero of faith is called to be faithful every day of the week. A life of consistency of character is a life that God can use to shape another person's life for eternity.

God used Boaz and Ruth to eventually be the great-grandfather of King David. And this means that Ruth—an outsider—became part of the family line of Jesus. (See Ruth 4:18-22; Matthew 1.) All this took place because God was at work.

Dear God, may I be a witness for you in all my words and deeds. And may I realize that you use events in time to affect eternity. In Jesus, Amen.

A MOTHER'S PRAYER

"Look on your servant's misery and . . . give [me] a son, then I will give him to the LORD . . ."
—1 Samuel 1:11

Today is my birthday. Some years ago my mother revealed to me that she prayed a prayer similar to Hannah's. That gives me deep affirmation and encouragement in my work.

This poignant story in Scripture can help to remind all parents to dedicate their children to the Lord, and to pray continually for God's protection and direction in their lives—into all kinds of vocations. All of us, in fact, can be reminded to serve God in our work, as 1 Corinthians 10:31 urges: "Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

As a pastor, I have known a number of couples who have prayed for children in their struggle with infertility. I know that many have also prayed a prayer similar to Hannah's.

Sometimes God answers those prayers by giving people chil-

dren, and other times God answers in other ways. From our limited perspective, we may struggle with some of God's answers or with the seeming silence of God. But we can be assured that God always hears us and cares about our needs and longings.

At the same time, perhaps all of us can be challenged to pray that all the children in our communities may come to know the Lord and dedicate their lives to him. Heroes of faith realize that faith needs to be passed on from generation to generation.

Dear Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we pray that the next generation will come to faith in you. Raise up this generation and the next for your glory, O Lord. Amen.

THE EARS OF A HERO

Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

—1 Samuel 3:10

Today's verses begin with the note that "the word of the LORD was rare" and "there were not many visions" in those days. Eli the priest was growing old, and his sons had dishonored the Lord through disobedience and abuse of their role as priests who were supposed to serve God.

In the midst of this silence and this trouble, Samuel began to serve in the house of the Lord, where the ark of God was. The ark contained the tablets of the Ten Commandments and served as a symbol that God was still present among his people.

When God woke him in the middle of the night, Samuel didn't know who was speaking. He thought it might be Eli. Eventually Eli realized that the Lord might be speaking to Samuel, and then Samuel received the instruction that

would direct his future and his role in God's kingdom.

The posture that opened up that future for Samuel was one of listening. Despite the fact that God gave us two ears and only one mouth, we live in a world that unleashes a torrent of words. We need space and peace and silence in order to hear and focus on God's Word to us today, provided in the Bible. God invites us: "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).

God is still speaking. Are we listening?

Dear God, may your Spirit direct us to still our hearts so that we can hear your Word to us. Direct our paths and our lives, we pray, and help us listen to you. In Jesus, Amen.

THE POWER OF “PERHAPS”

“Perhaps the LORD will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the LORD from saving”
—1 Samuel 14:6

These words from Jonathan, son of King Saul, came from a background of knowing one’s need. The previous chapter explains that the Philistines had a monopoly on metalworking, and they deprived Israel of the ability to make metal tools and weapons. As a result, when the army of Israel gathered, only Saul and Jonathan had a metal sword and spear.

In this desperate situation, Jonathan, as a person of faith, aimed to be used by God. He was uncertain about the future, but he was certain that God could save his people. So Jonathan and his faithful armor-bearer went out to attack the Philistines, the enemies of God.

Often we are tempted to hold back from a step of faith unless the outcome is assured. For example, we hesitate to invite a person to church unless we are

sure they will say yes. We don’t want to appear foolish. And yet, the line between foolishness and faith has always been a matter of perspective.

Jonathan set out with no guarantee that God would give him the victory. He only knew that Israel totally depended on God and that God could give success—and that was enough.

As people of faith, we need to be open to “perhaps” moments in which we follow God, not necessarily knowing the destination but trusting the guide.

Dear Spirit, guide us in all truth, and especially guide us in moments of uncertainty. May we know the power of following you and you alone. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

AN UNLIKELY CHOICE

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

The Lord willing, I will be inaugurated as the seventh president of Calvin Theological Seminary tomorrow. I've been told that when the presidential search committee began its search process, their opening devotions were based on the verses from today's Scripture.

I do not mean to compare my selection to that of David, but I do know something of being an "unlikely" choice. Maybe you do as well. If so, we are in good company.

I am sure that God has a sense of humor, and I know that he sees far beyond what we see. As Samuel came looking for a king, he was initially impressed by appearance and height. Even David's father hadn't bothered to call David in from the fields to appear before Samuel. It was only after all the other sons had been seen and passed by that

Jesse sent for David—and God directed Samuel to anoint this young shepherd as the future king of Israel.

These verses remind me that God is the great director—not me. I am also challenged to see others as God would see them. The outward appearance can get in my way of seeing as God would have me see. As I move into a new position, I pray for God's vision, and I pray that he prompts me to recognize the "unlikely" people that he aims to work through to build his kingdom.

Dear God, please forgive us when our sight is limited and prejudicial. Be our vision, I pray today! In Jesus' name, Amen.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might . . . rest on . . . God's power. —1 Corinthians 2:4-5

Lord willing, I will be inaugurated as president of Calvin Theological Seminary today. Today also marks my ordination as a pastor.

I remember very well my first preaching assignment. My wife had gotten me a new pair of shoes for that special day. She advised me to scuff the soles so that my steps would be a little more certain. I forgot. (She might say I ignored her advice.)

As I walked toward the pulpit, I felt fairly confident. For this memorable day, I had decided to take a picture to mark the moment. I took the picture and, with camera in hand, began ascending the pulpit steps. The soles of my new shoes then acted like skis, and the carpet like snow. I took off in flight and quickly landed at the bottom of the steps—upright but a little

surprised. So was the congregation.

I recall that incident like it happened yesterday. God has a way of reminding us that his power is revealed not by our wisdom but by the Spirit, who works through us.

Today's verses remind us in a very vivid way that God uses ordinary people for his extraordinary purposes.

God also uses the wisdom of a spouse. And I now scuff the soles of new shoes before wearing them.

Lord, may your Spirit direct and lead us. Thank you for calling each of us to be used by you. May we become demonstrations of your Spirit's power in us. Amen.

GOD'S TIMING, NOT OURS

"Some urged me to kill you, but . . . I said, 'I will not lay my hand on . . . the LORD'S anointed.'"
—1 Samuel 24:10

1 Samuel 16 records the story of Samuel anointing David to be king—the Lord's anointed. And yet Saul also is God's anointed. Now we find David running for his life from Saul, who is jealous. David is an obvious threat to Saul's throne, and Saul has decided that the only way to deal with this threat is to eliminate it.

In today's verses Saul enters a cave where David and his men are hidden. By cutting off a piece of Saul's robe while the king doesn't notice, David proves that he could easily have taken Saul's life. But David regrets even this action against Saul.

"Some urged me to kill you, but I spared you...because [you are] the LORD'S anointed," David says. Those words prompt Saul to drop his pursuit of David—for a time.

But if David knows he also is the LORD'S anointed, why not think that perhaps God placed Saul in the cave so that David could take Saul's life and "hurry up" the process of becoming the next king? Because confidence in being the LORD'S anointed means trusting God's timing, not one's own.

In life we are often challenged to trust God's timing. We want something now—but God seems to be in no hurry. Our impatience needs to be shaped by trust in God's power and God's schedule.

Dear God, please deepen my trust in your timing and your purposes. When I am anxious, help me to lean into you and not run ahead of you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

GENTLE WORDS

"Pardon your servant, my lord, and let me speak to you; hear what your servant has to say."
—1 Samuel 25:24

Sometimes people live down to their name. Nabal means "fool," and Nabal certainly demonstrated that his name described his character. David's men had kept Nabal's flocks and shepherds safe, and in return David expected Nabal to show appreciation. But Nabal saw no reason to say thank you, and he even insulted David and his men.

Disagreements can be compared to a fire. In response to a fire, we can do one of two things. We can either fuel it to keep it going and growing, or we can put it out.

Nabal's wife Abigail was wise and knew what was needed. She mediated on behalf of Nabal. She even put the blame on herself. Her words and actions reduced the tension and doused the fire that could have gone out of control. Abigail's words and actions that day

resulted in peace instead of bloodshed—at least for a time.

Our words can still cause fires to erupt. Whether it's a word of gossip or boasting or prejudice or insult, there is always a price.

Nabal soon paid a price for his self-styled ways. But Abigail was rewarded for her gentle words that calmed a storm. (See 1 Samuel 25:36-44.) God used her ordinary words for an extraordinary moment in his redemptive story.

Dear Word of Life, may our words be shaped by a heart that is more and more in line with yours. Help me to develop the habit of gentle, wise words. Amen.

NOT AN EASY LIFE

"You will drink from the brook, and I have directed the ravens to supply you with food there."
—1 Kings 17:4

People of faith are not promised an easy life, but they are promised that God will be with them.

As we begin to look at the life of the prophet Elijah, we see that his work begins with a message of judgment from God. King Ahab and Queen Jezebel are ruling the land, but in their kingdom Baal is worshiped front and center and the worship of the true God is pushed to the back row.

The sins of the rulers and the sins of the people lead to God's punishment. Elijah announces, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word." The consequence of Israel's sin is that the nation's fertile land will become a desert, and everyone will suffer. God's judgment even affects Elijah. He will need water and food in this time of famine.

It will not be easy to be a person that God will use. But God tells Elijah where to live and find water, and God assures Elijah that the ravens will supply him with food.

We don't know what the food looked like after being in a raven's beak. What probably did happen, though, is that whenever a raven landed with his daily bread, Elijah gave a prayer of thanks: "The Lord has provided for me—today."

Maker of heaven and earth, thank you for providing for me today. Thank you for your promises to be with me, especially in the difficult times of life. Carry me, I pray. Amen.

FIRST GIVE

“Don’t be afraid. . . . But first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me” —1 Kings 17:13

The brook that provided water for Elijah dried up. So God told him to move to another area, where a widow would supply him with food.

A famine was ravaging the land, and it was severely affecting the life of that young widow. With no husband, no food, and a hungry child, it looked like she and her son would die soon.

She was planning their final meal when Elijah arrived. Tired from his journey, he asked her for water and food.

She explained that she was preparing a last meal for her son and herself. But Elijah asked if she could first make him a small loaf of bread, and he shared with her a promise from the Lord: “The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD sends rain on the land.”

This widow now had to make a decision. Should she believe the words of this prophet before feeding herself and her son?

This “ordinary” person was someone whom God would use for his extraordinary purposes.

She did as Elijah asked, honoring the Lord with her act of hospitality. And God miraculously provided her with flour and oil that never ran out until the end of the famine. She gave—and God gave even more.

God of life and light, help me to be more generous. May I be challenged by the realization that I can never out-give you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

FROM WEEPING TO WITNESS

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

You would think it was enough. To have a jar of never-ending flour and a bottomless jug of oil was a sign of God's favor, right? (See 1 Kings 17:14-16.) Surely that was enough for this mother to have faith.

But then the woman's son became sick. His condition worsened, and he died. The jar still had flour and the jug still had oil, but it was not enough. Her life felt empty, and she cried out against Elijah, questioning the motives of his God.

Elijah asked her to give him her son's body, and she did so. He carried the boy upstairs, where he cried out to God and stretched himself over the body. In his mercy God gave the gift of life again, and death was vanquished.

Elijah had the great joy of returning the son, alive, to his

mother. The body that was so heavy as it was carried to the upper room was no burden in the return trip to a mother whose groans of sorrow turned to shouts of joy. God had turned her doubt and emptiness into faith and fullness—and she gave witness to her faith in God and his Word.

Sometimes we weep and question God. But when we center our life on Jesus, the one who died and came back to life for our sake, we begin to see God's plan to replace the tears and sorrows of this world with testimonies of faith and joy.

Dear God, wipe away our tears. Surround those in deep sorrow with your care and comfort. May we find, in you, faith and life eternal. Amen.

SERVING TO SAVE

Obadiah had taken a hundred prophets and hidden them in two caves . . . and had supplied them with food . . . —1 Kings 18:4

A confrontation was coming. God sent Elijah back to confront King Ahab, who had brought Baal worship into Israel and whose wife, Jezebel, was trying to kill off the Lord's prophets. In the midst of this turmoil was Obadiah. He was in charge of Ahab's palace, but he was also a devout believer in the Lord.

What was it like to be in such an important position in a corrupt administration? Obadiah did not confuse his position with his purpose for living. Obadiah knew he had been placed in such a position not for his personal gain but to be an instrument of God, and particularly an instrument of life. Knowing that his purpose was to save others, Obadiah protected a hundred prophets of God from certain death.

We do not know much about Obadiah's rescue mission, but

we know it was intentional, strategic, and dangerous. As Obadiah supplied food and water for the prophets whom Jezebel was trying to kill, he may even have diverted food and water from the queen's table.

In a difficult situation, Obadiah marked his course by clarifying his mission in life: to serve God and be an instrument of salvation. From that foundation, Obadiah found the freedom that comes from serving God.

God of life and salvation, help me not to confuse my position in life with my purpose for living. Help me to see that you desire to work through me as an ambassador for you. Amen.

FOLLOWING OR WAVERING?

“How long will you waver . . . ? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.”
—1 Kings 18:21

One prophet of God stands against 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. The focus of this confrontation is on how the Lord and Baal will respond. But the question that prompts this battle pulls everyone on Mount Carmel into the conflict: “Whom will you follow?” When Elijah confronts the people with that question, they say nothing.

The people’s silence is the silence of indecision. It is also the silence of disobedience. Ultimately it is deadly. No decision for God is a decision that will lead to separation from the God who brings life.

What filled that silence?

In that moment of confrontation the people could have responded with cries of repentance and with prayers seeking forgiveness. But they said nothing. They did not commit to

anything. Perhaps they thought silence was the better approach.

Maybe you have been in situations where it seemed sensible to say nothing. But at Mount Carmel the people’s silence was a sign of wavering—they failed to confess their sins, and that was a statement against God.

Stating our faith and our need for repentance is the way we come out in the open. Don’t be silent. Following God means understanding the need for and the power of forgiveness—and sharing that with others.

Dear God, I confess that often I try to cover up. I fail to speak up about my faith, and I fail to confess my sins before you. Help me to seek and share your love. Forgive me, I pray. Amen.

BLEEDING FOR ATTENTION

They shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed.

—1 Kings 18:28

Blood was flowing. In this contest between the Lord and Baal on Mount Carmel, Elijah had challenged the prophets of Baal with the silence of their god. In response, the prophets of Baal shouted louder and began to cut themselves. This went on hour after hour, “but there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.”

No one responded because Baal was a false god. There is no way to have a relationship with a god that doesn't exist. You get no response, and no changes occur in your life—except that you wander farther and farther from the true God.

In today's world there are still people who “cut” themselves in order to have someone pay attention. They want to feel something, so they may cut themselves to bleed or hurt themselves in some other way

in an effort to find “healing.” But that never works.

There is someone who was cut for us. There is someone who bled for us. There is someone who did respond, answer, and pay attention for our sake. His name is Jesus. Jesus is the prophet of God, the Son of God, who willingly gave of himself, fully and completely. Jesus bled for us. And as a result, our lives need never be the same. Our healing can begin through the blood of Jesus Christ.

Dear God, thank you for the grace that is available through the sacrifice of Jesus. May we be encouraged by knowing you are alive and you desire to bring life to us through Jesus. Amen.

“COME HERE TO ME”

Elijah said to all the people, “Come here to me.”

—1 Kings 18:30

On Mount Carmel, Elijah has called for a showdown between the false god Baal and the true God of Israel. Baal has not responded to the cries of his prophets. Elijah turns again to the people who have gathered. Earlier that day, Elijah had challenged the people to choose between Baal and the living God. The people's response at that time was silence (see 1 Kings 18:21).

But Elijah gives the people another opportunity to respond. This invitation parallels the invitation of Jesus when he says, “Follow me.” In response to Elijah's call, “Come here to me,” the people come forward and watch as Elijah prepares the altar. They participate in soaking the sacrifice, and they wait upon the Lord.

Instead of the noise of constant pleading and shouting, Elijah steps forward to pray to the

living God. And the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel responds in that time and place. The soaked sacrifice is no match for the fire of God. Elijah has asked God to respond so that the people will know that the Lord who sent Elijah is the true God, who is “turning their hearts back again.”

The people's silence is completely broken by their response to seeing God at work: “The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!” Hearing the invitation is vital, but so is responding to that invitation, with voices, hearts, and lives.

O God, thank you for the invitations you give—again and again. May we hear your call and come to you, responding with our voices, hearts, and lives. Amen.

WAITING AND WATCHING

The seventh time the servant reported, "A cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea." —1 Kings 18:44

The contest on Mount Carmel was won, but the work was not yet finished. The prophets of Baal paid the price for their deception and lies. Then Elijah declared that the true God of heaven and earth would follow up his victory by sending rain to break the dryness and famine of the land.

Elijah prays and then tells his servant to go and look toward the sea. Again and again the servant reports back, "There is nothing there." Each time, Elijah sends the servant back to look again.

Even on this great day of God's glory, we see that people of faith do not always receive what they ask for in the way and timing they might want. Elijah's servant doesn't see any change in the sky, but God is working to bring about change.

Waiting and watching is often the posture of a servant of God. It is not easy and it is not something people look forward to, but waiting and watching can be fruitful. The servant of Elijah probably never forgot the times of disappointment as well as the excitement of seeing that small cloud and the great rain that followed.

Six times there was nothing to see, but the seventh time there was something. It was small. It was a cloud as small as a man's hand, but it was enough.

Dear God, give us the patience to wait and watch for signs of your amazing work—to your glory. Open our eyes, that we may see. In Jesus' name, Amen.

COMING DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAINTOP

"I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."

—1 Kings 19:4

It had been a day of overwhelming victory. God had revealed his presence and power in fire and storm. The power of God had even come on Elijah, stirring him to run ahead of Ahab's chariot.

But then Elijah received a death threat from Queen Jezebel, and he ran for his life. In just a short time, Elijah went from being a confident prophet of the Lord on Mount Carmel to a man who doubted that his life was worth living.

As Elijah was running from Jezebel, he decided to separate from his servant. Maybe he thought he could travel faster alone. Or maybe he was just ready to go into the desert and die. Here we see that Elijah was not superhuman but was an ordinary person like us. Though he was God's prophet and the Lord had worked through him

in powerful ways, Elijah was now physically, spiritually, and emotionally exhausted. He was also afraid.

After everything that had happened, Ahab and Jezebel were still on the throne, and Elijah had reached his limit. He went into a tailspin toward deep depression and couldn't see a way out. "LORD . . . take my life," he said. Though Elijah couldn't see it, God was still at work and hadn't given up on him.

When we come down from the mountaintop, God is there with us too.

God of the mountains and valleys, keep us close. Protect and deliver us, we pray. Give us the rest and strength we need, and help us serve you again. In Jesus' name, Amen.

REFRESHED BY GOD

An angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat."

—1 Kings 19:5

Elijah is physically, spiritually, and emotionally exhausted. He is also running for his life and wants God to end it (see 1 Kings 19:1-4). In this moment of great need, God provides refreshment beyond comparison. God first meets Elijah's physical needs: food, water, and sleep. Then God fortifies Elijah for a forty-day journey and an encounter that meets his spiritual needs.

God is not finished with Elijah. A journey directed by God to the mountain of God brings Elijah to an encounter with God. Elijah is able to cry out to God from the brokenness of his condition. Elijah is distraught and even a bit disoriented as he complains that he is the only prophet left.

God takes it all in and then shows up—not in the wind or earthquake or fire, but in a gentle whisper. Elijah needs to

listen closely as God gives him a new assignment that includes the anointing of new kings and a successor to himself as prophet.

Then, finally, God confirms to Elijah that he is not alone. The Lord has reserved 7,000 faithful believers among the people of Israel.

On our journey of faith we too need refreshment. We need God to provide for us physically, spiritually, and emotionally. The wonder of the walk of grace is that God does just that—again and again.

Provider God, when we are not able to take another step, may we be assured that you are already providing for us. Refresh us, we pray, in your Son's name. Amen.

NO TURNING BACK

Elisha . . . burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate.

—1 Kings 19:21

God has instructed Elijah to anoint his successor, Elisha. When they meet, Elisha is plowing on his family's land. He is driving the twelfth pair among twelve yoke of oxen, which tells us that the family farm is large and prosperous.

As Elijah throws his cloak around Elisha, a decision must be made. Elisha's family, his land, his wealth, and his future are in the balance.

Will he turn toward the assignment God is giving, or will he turn from God?

Will Elisha serve God or himself?

When some people make commitments to God, they are half-hearted, or they hold back. In some ways they are lukewarm, and that limits their journey with God.

But there is nothing half-hearted about Elisha's response. After he says good-bye to his family, he takes his oxen and slaughters them. He burns the plowing equipment. He has no need for a plow in this new calling he has received.

The combination of burning equipment and roasting oxen meat leads to a party where people gather for a farewell meal. Elisha shows to all his family and neighbors and especially to God that he is taking the road of not turning back. Elisha is "all in" for God.

Dear God, when I am tempted to be lukewarm for you and your ways, may your Spirit enflame my life more and more for you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

EXTRAORDINARY COMPASSION

"If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."
—2 Kings 5:3

If anyone had an excuse not to be used by God, the servant girl of Naaman did. She had been captured by the enemy. She had been taken from her family, her people, and her land. She was a stranger and a foreigner, and now she was a slave in the household of Naaman.

If anyone had an excuse not to be compassionate, this servant girl did. Many people in her circumstances might have taken great joy at the suffering of their master. Naaman was afflicted with leprosy, a deforming disease that separated people from their community and eventually caused great suffering and death. And yet this slave girl saw herself as a servant of the living God. When suffering entered into her household, she wanted to see that suffering relieved and her master healed.

In our passage, the phrase "If only . . ." is like a hinge on which the heart of the story of God unfolds. This phrase needs to be read with compassion and hope. This unnamed servant girl's plaintive cry to her master's wife starts Naaman on a journey that will eventually lead him to Elisha and an encounter with the living God. An unnamed servant girl has a heart of compassion, and that leads to a life that is changed by the power and heart of God.

God of healing and hope, there is suffering in this world, in our neighborhoods, and in our families. May we be instruments of your compassion, healing, and hope. Amen.

HUMILITY NEEDED

"Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel. So please accept a gift from your servant." —2 Kings 5:15

Naaman is on a journey to seek healing from leprosy. He first goes to the king of Israel, but that king is not the source of healing. Elisha hears about this visitor from a foreign land and invites the king to send Naaman to him.

Naaman arrives at the house of Elisha, expecting to get a royal welcome and healing from the prophet himself. But instead a servant comes out and tells him to wash seven times in the Jordan River. Naaman's expectations almost derail his pilgrimage. Generals do not expect to take orders, especially from the servant of a prophet!

In this critical moment, however, Naaman's own servants redirect his path. These unnamed servants respectfully challenge Naaman not to turn away from an "ordinary task" when he would have willingly

done a much more difficult thing. Naaman wisely listens to these servants, humbles himself, and dips into the Jordan River.

Naaman obeys, and he is healed. A journey that began with an unnamed servant girl from Israel ends with Naaman testifying that there is no God in the whole world except the God of Israel. Naaman's unnamed servants are ordinary people whom God uses for his extraordinary purposes. Because of their words, a follower of God is "born again" in the waters of the Jordan.

God of all grace, thank you for the healing that comes when we humble ourselves before you. Thank you for the community of faith that can encourage us on our journey to you. Amen.

PRAYING “SO THAT” PRAYERS

“Our God, deliver us . . . so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone, LORD, are God.” —2 Kings 19:19

Today’s verses relate a very important story about a prayer of Hezekiah, king of Judah.

The king of Assyria has threatened Jerusalem and warned that unless God’s people surrender, he will cut off the water supply to the city. In the face of this serious threat to his people, King Hezekiah goes into the temple and prays.

You might think Hezekiah would pray first of all for deliverance—and for water! But his prayer in this moment of crisis is for God’s honor and glory.

Hezekiah’s prayer is not just for the rescue of Jerusalem but for the proclamation that the Lord is the one true God throughout the earth. Other kingdoms serve false gods that are made of wood or stone and fashioned by human hands. Sennacherib’s armies have destroyed all those

gods. But the God of Israel is the God who made heaven and earth. He is the sovereign God who can never be destroyed.

Heroes of faith do not seek their own glory. They recognize that their life is an instrument for use by the living God. Hezekiah’s prayer asks for deliverance—“so that” all kingdoms may know that “the LORD” is the one true God.

We grow in faith when we turn our prayers into “so that” prayers for God’s glory.

Dear God, in offices, at job sites, in our homes and schools, may we live and pray “so that” others may know that you alone are the true God. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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