

Today

Nov/Dec 2011

refresh, refocus, renew

JESUS,
LORD OF ALL

ALSO: DOING JESUS' MISSION HIS WAY

Dear Friends,

The background and experience of our authors for the last two months of the year reminds us that at the heart of the gospel is the call to spread the good news of Jesus “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8; see Matthew 28:19).



Allen and Lynn Likkel have been involved in church planting and cultivating new generations of church planters in North America. And Hernandes Lopes, the Portuguese ministry leader of Back to God Ministries International, has brought the good news to Brazil and to Portuguese speakers around the world. In fact, he heads a staff of thirty people involved in all areas of media missions from our new ministry center, about 60 miles (96 km) outside of Sao Paulo, Brazil. For more information about this ministry, visit our website at www.lpc.org.br.

Together our team of authors reminds us that good-news telling is both for communities near at hand—and around the world.

During this season of the year, as we cultivate a heart of thankfulness for all God's gifts, but especially for the gift of God's Son, will you remember that the good news isn't something we should keep to ourselves? Our joy grows and grows as we spread it around to others.

In Christ's service,

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

Bob

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**“Doing Jesus’ Mission
His Way”
Allen and Lynn Likkel**



**“Jesus, Lord of All”
Hernandes Dias Lopes**

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re:FRAME MEDIA

this month

Doing Jesus' Mission His Way

Allen and Lynn Likkel

God's love for this world has resulted in the amazing act of sending his Son, Jesus, to fulfill the mission of his Father by becoming one of us. This month we'll not only consider what it means that Jesus entered this world in our flesh but also that he calls us to join in his mission: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21). We'll consider what it means to participate in Jesus' mission in Jesus' way. It is our hope and prayer that as we enter the Advent season at the end of the month, these devotions will also help to prepare us to celebrate the incarnation and birth of our Lord.

Revs. Allen and Lynn Likkel have worked in communities across North America for many years—planting churches, nurturing them along, and developing new church leaders. A minister in the Christian Reformed Church, Allen served with Christian Reformed Home Missions for nearly 40 years, and Lynn, also ordained as a minister of the Word, has served to build leaders and new congregations. In November 2010, Allen entered retirement, and the Likkels moved to Washington, their native state. They have four adult children.

FROM FEAR TO JOY TO CALL

The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. . . . Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."
—John 20:20-21

Sunday evening. Locked doors. Terrified disciples. Jesus had been killed, but was reported to be alive again. How could the disciples possibly absorb what was happening?

Suddenly Jesus appears. He's alive! Hearts thrill to see Jesus' comforting look of love. Fear is replaced by exuberant joy.

Then Jesus calls his disciples to join him in his mission of love for the world. This is a daunting challenge. Only those who really experience the love of the living, risen Lord will be able to respond to his call.

What terrifies you? Finances? Political unrest in the world? Today Jesus invites you to look at him and to see how much he loves you. Today he calls you to join in his mission. Would you like to experience the full extent of his love? Will you sur-

render your fears to Jesus? He invites you to receive him, to get to know him, and to start the relationship of a lifetime.

Then you too will experience the overwhelming joy of hearing him say, "Peace be with you," and "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20).

As Jesus invites you to begin this journey, you'll find you can't do it on your own. But Christ's Spirit is there to help you. Ask, and he will answer.

Lord, we are weak and fearful. We cannot find our way to you on our own. Help us today to respond to your call and to follow you, by your Spirit's strength, in your mission of love. Amen.

A MISSIONARY GOD

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son
—1 John 4:10

What is your mental picture of God? Some imagine a kindly grandfather. Others see a severe judge. Our text pictures God as love. He loved us before we were even lovable. Only a God of infinite love would send his eternal Son into this troubled world to die for our sins and to live within us. In the fully human yet fully divine Jesus we know and experience God. "If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have *seen* him." (John 14:7). We don't get one without the other.

Jesus makes clear that God is a missionary God. As missiologist David Bosch says, "God is a fountain of sending love." Jesus wants to shape our thoughts about God. "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21). "For God so loved

the world" (John 3:16). Is this how you think of God? Is this how you know God? This is the God Jesus invites us to know in a faith relationship with him. And as the sent one, Jesus is inviting us to live as he lived.

Nothing has changed. God is still the same, still on a mission of love. God continues to "so love the world." By his Spirit our missionary God is at work "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Let him embrace you anew today. Ask him to help you to love others as he does.

God, you love us so much that it nearly takes our breath away. We don't deserve it. But we thank you. Please open our hearts to love others as you love us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

OUR MISSIONARY JESUS

"The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

—Luke 19:10

Do you know your purpose in life? Jesus did. When Jesus had dinner with Zacchaeus, he knew the religious leaders were upset because he was hanging out with a tax collector who had become rich from people's hard-earned wages. With a laser focus on his purpose Jesus clarifies why he was on earth: to reach people who needed the embrace of God's forgiveness and love.

When I (Allen) was young, I was often sent out to the barn to feed the calves. My mission was clear. But, as a typical kid, I was easily distracted by other wonderful things: a dog to play with, a bike to ride, a basketball to shoot. I'd actually go back into the house having forgotten to do what I was sent to do.

Most of us get distracted or sidetracked every day from our purposes. Not Jesus. He saw the crowds of his day, and he sees

them today. He sees Zacchaeus up a tree. He sees you and me. Moved with a heart of love and compassion, he saw the people who needed his shepherding love as "harassed and helpless" (Matthew 9:36). Jesus never forgot why the Father had sent him.

Do you know God's purpose for your life? Do you really believe you are also sent? Has God called you to his mission? Think about what it means to be a part of God's "fountain of sending love" (David Bosch).

God, please forgive me for the times I've not understood or accepted my role in your mission. Forgive me for getting distracted. Show me how I am called to your kingdom work. Amen.

HANGING OUT IN OUR NEIGHBORHOOD

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

—John 1:14

In situations of grief or stress, have you ever heard someone say, “I understand?” It’s a risky statement. It should be used with great caution. Can we really understand what someone else is experiencing? Can someone else really feel what I’m feeling? Most of the time we get it wrong. But sometimes there is real comfort when someone who’s “been there” understands a lot of what we are going through.

The gospel means “good news,” and a major dimension of this is that Jesus understands us. He “gets it.” Jesus invites us to join him in his sending mission of love. He says, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21).

There’s a big word that describes exactly how Jesus was sent into the world. It’s called *incarnation*. Jesus became one

of us. He lived among us. He hung out in our neighborhood. He experienced life fully and completely as we do. He was even tempted, “as we are—yet he did not sin.” He “gets it” because he was one of us.

Isn’t that incredible good news? A few years ago there was a popular song that said, “What if God were one of us . . . ?” But he already is. God chose to reach us through his Son, Jesus, becoming a human being in every respect.

Why do you think God has put you in your neighborhood? Think about that today.

Lord, thank you for walking with me through my life’s situations. Show me how to connect with others in my neighborhood and to share your good news with them. Amen.

“NAZARETH! . . . ?”

“Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?”

—John 1:46

When Christians worship in a big multiethnic gathering, they often say, “This must be a taste of what heaven is like.” Richly diverse styles of music and expressions of praise weave a beautiful tapestry. It’s a foretaste of the new creation in which all tribes and people groups of the world will gather together (see Revelation 7:9).

When Jesus came into this world, he entered a specific place and culture. But he also came to be the Savior and Lord of people in every culture and place. He demonstrated how the good news comes to us right where we are. And that’s part of the good news of Jesus—it can be expressed in every language, and it speaks into every culture.

Christ’s followers do not have to speak the same language, dress the same way, or lift up

one culture above another. We honor Christ as we take the best of every culture and place it in service to our Lord. In fact, the gospel is so rich that it takes all our cultures, languages, music, and art to fully express it.

Jesus entered deeply into the lives of a ragtag bunch of Jewish Galileans. He shared in their language, music, humor, and lifestyle. He also took what they knew and built on it to build his kingdom.

Jesus loves your neighborhood too. Do you?

Lord, help us to appreciate where you’ve placed us. Help us to value others and not judge them for being different from us. Help us to love as you love. Amen.

THE SERVANT LEADER

He made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.
—Philippians 2:7

I (Allen) once met with a large group of church planters from across several denominations. They were all leaders of churches experiencing great evangelistic growth. They all had in common a deep love for Jesus and a passionate concern for the people in the communities they served. They were servant-leaders.

When Jesus says, “As the Father has sent me” (John 20:21), he is calling us to lead as he does. Jesus was the ultimate Servant, laying aside his rights and privileges as the Son of God. Being sent meant humbling himself to become one of us. In so doing, he took on himself the consequences of our sin.

How do you perceive God? Are you willing to be shaped by Jesus to become a servant of others? Jesus helps us to offer people his beautiful invitation: “Come to me, all you who are

weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

Just as Jesus became a servant to us, he invites us to find rest and strength in him so that we can become servants to others. He loves us so much that he gave his life for us. And he calls us to serve sacrificially so that others can find rest for their souls.

Lord, life can be difficult. As we struggle, help us to surrender our pride and discover that in you we may find rest for the journey and strength to share your love. Amen.

A MISSIONARY PEOPLE

"Go and make disciples of all nations"

—Matthew 28:19

We have a young friend who has wise parents. They help him think about his teenage behaviors. Whenever he would leave the house to go somewhere, his parents would always look him in the eye and say, "Remember who you are."

That's good advice. We sometimes need to be reminded of who we are. More important, we need to remember "whose" we are. To whom do you belong?

Jesus invites us to the greatest adventure ever: "As the Father has sent me, I am *sending you*" (John 20:21). Christ-followers remember their true identity—they are a "sent" people—a missionary people. Making disciples means everything to Jesus. What a privilege to be included in his mission of love! Being "sent" is the main mission of the church, the body of Christ. The church is sent into the world on Christ's mission.

Think about where you are in life. You are not there by chance. You regularly encounter people in your routine activities. You are there because God has a purpose for your life. He wants you to spread the good news of the gospel right where you are.

However, we cannot give what we do not have. To make disciples, we must continually reconnect with the living Christ and walk with him. Are you ready to embrace the adventure to which you are called?

Lord, we hear your invitation to mission. Give us the will and courage to follow wherever you lead. Help us see the people you want us to share your love with today. Amen.

POWER UP

"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses. . . ."

—Acts 1:8

One of my tasks as a teenager (Allen) was to help lay out new irrigation systems for farmers. I especially enjoyed the moment when we'd throw the switch and power up the big pump. The pipe filled, sprinklers hissed, and water shot out across the field.

Imagine the disciples' power-up moment. They were able to switch from fear and uncertainty to courage and boldness when the power of the Holy Spirit filled them (see Acts 2:7). Some scholars compare this with God breathing the breath of life into Adam at creation (Genesis 2:7). Receiving the breath of God is a "power-up" moment. (See also John 20:22.)

Not only do we need a personal relationship with Jesus before being sent out, but we need to rely on him always to empower us to do his work. Sometimes God gives us amazing con-

nections with people we have never met. Some first-time conversations immediately go to a place where we can witness with power to someone who needs God's love. But sometimes it's much harder. Our task is to trust that God will show us how to respond with a smile, a hug, a thoughtful word, or perhaps just by listening.

When is the last time you specifically asked God for his power to witness? It's time to power up!

Lord, thank you for your promise of power through the Holy Spirit. "Breathe on me, Breath of God, fill me with life anew, that I may love the way you love, and do what you would do." Amen.

WITNESS WHERE YOU ARE

"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea. . . ."

—Acts 1:8

During our first seminary summer internship, God placed us in Mount Rainier National Park. There we discovered a mission field. This experience absolutely changed our lives. We had never before engaged in Christ's mission apart from specific activities in our local churches. Through relationships with park employees and visitors, Jesus opened our eyes to see great mission opportunities close to home. We discovered how much we loved those people who did not yet know the Lord. We enjoyed sharing Jesus with them. The experience forever shaped our desire to join Jesus in his mission wherever God would place us.

Jesus calls us into his mission of love right where we are. Sometimes "mission trips" away from home create a misperception that we need to go away from our everyday settings if

we want to serve in Christ's mission. We need to ask Jesus to open our eyes to the opportunities for mission in our own surroundings too.

Wherever we had the privilege to plant churches, the challenge was to think carefully about our "spheres of influence." What were the regular patterns of life for us on a daily or weekly basis, and who were the people we consistently met in those situations? Those spheres of influence are the places where Jesus asks you to see people with his eyes. Whom does Jesus want you to see today?

Lord, bring to our hearts and minds those who are right in front of us today. Help us to see them and to reach out to them with your love. Amen.

A GROWING VISION FOR MISSION

"You will be my witnesses in . . . Samaria. . . ."

—Acts 1:8

All of us are raised in a particular culture or subculture. We have language, clothing, music, geography—and many of us have church practices—that are familiar to us. We are comfortable with what's familiar. Sadly, we often assume prejudices about people from other cultures and places.

Jesus calls us, his missionary people, out of our comfort zones. The people among whom Jesus carried on most of his ministry despised the Samaritans. Jesus' own journey through Samaria and the encounter with the Samaritan woman in today's verses give us a profound message. Jesus' love, which he empowers us to share, knows no boundaries of sinful prejudice or cultural preference.

Churches and Christians in North America, many of whom come out of western European cultures, can fall into sinful prej-

udice and pride. We easily think our ways of worship and our kind of music set the ultimate standard by which all others should be evaluated.

We served a multiethnic church in New York for seven years. Jesus confronted us with our prejudices and subtle (or not so subtle) feelings of cultural superiority that needed to be confessed.

When we do that and go to the people of our "Samaria" with Christ's mission of love, we are blessed and enriched. Who lives in your "Samaria"?

Lord, forgive our superior attitudes and prejudices. Help us to appreciate the diversity you have created. Help us to see you in people's lives. Amen.

A GLOBAL MISSION HERE AT HOME

"You will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth."

—Acts 1:8

"God so loved the world . . ." (John 3:16). Jesus, the Lord of the harvest, loves the people of Mexico City, Paris, New York City, Cairo, Toronto, Guatemala City, Beijing, Moscow, Miami, Jakarta, Nairobi, Edmonton, Tripoli, and Seattle.

As time goes on, our sovereign God is also bringing the nations closer together, so there is a convergence of the mission "to the nations" and the mission to people in our own local areas. Today, for example, many of us are discovering that the peoples of the world are coming to North America. According to the United States census in 2000, immigrants from around the world numbered 31.1 million, or 11.1 percent of the U.S. population. This was a rapid increase from 19.8 million in 1990. And by 2009 the immigrant population rose again significantly to 38.5

million, nearly twice the amount from twenty years ago.

Today Jesus asks us to follow him into his global mission right where we are. So as people from many nations come to live among us, we learn to serve "the nations" as our neighbors in our cities and backyards.

Even so, we are also still drawn into mission opportunities internationally, "to the ends of the earth."

What an exciting time! What are you willing to do to join Jesus in his global mission?

Lord, show us how to break down walls that keep us from reaching out to neighbors. Thank you for bringing people from the ends of the earth to our own area. Amen.

CHAMELEONS OR MISSIONARIES?

I have become all things to all people so that . . . I might save some . . . for the sake of the gospel . . . —1 Corinthians 9:22-23

How can you be “all things to all people” in your life today? Consider the approach of the apostle Paul. His sermon to the Greeks at the Areopagus in Athens (see Acts 17:16-31) was vastly different from his message to the Jews of Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:13-47).

The good news of Jesus is unchanging. But the way we share and express that message through our lives, music, art, and worship must change and be adapted to the persons and people groups where God places us. Our commitment, like that of Paul, is to make the great truth of the one gospel understandable in every cultural context.

Some years ago, God gave us the privilege of planting a new church in Nanaimo, British Columbia. Through immersing ourselves in the community culture there, we soon learned

that jazz music was deeply embedded in the culture of that city (several well-known jazz musicians got their start there). We often featured gospel jazz in our early-morning service of worship. Among our greatest evangelistic events was a jazz funeral service for a beloved jazz musician/teacher.

This is what makes the gospel of Christ so exciting, beautiful, and inviting. It translates into every language, culture, and musical form. Jesus’ challenge to us not only permits but requires us to be students of local cultures and people.

Lord, remove our blind spots and fears that prevent us from translating the gospel into the cultures around us. Help us remember that you came for all peoples. Amen.

TRUSTING GOD

"Take nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt."
—Luke 9:3

We are students of evangelism and church planting, and we have coached others in these ministry areas. But we want to put forth a *big* word of caution: It is not by our techniques or clever strategies that people come into the kingdom of Jesus Christ. As Jesus indicates in our text, success isn't dependent on a wealth of human resources. The kingdom grows through humble servant missionaries who depend every moment of every day on Jesus Christ for their provision. Christ builds his kingdom.

"When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come" (John 16:13). Jesus promises us a counselor, guide, and friend—the Holy Spirit.

We continue to hear how God arranges "divine appointments" for Christians with people who open up to them about needs in their lives. Often the Holy Spirit has provided the exact preparation for a conversation by connecting people who have had a similar experience, or who know a particular person, book, or resource that directly addresses their need.

Offer yourself anew to Jesus today. Ask to be made aware and ready for "divine appointments" with no provision but what Jesus gives. You can always trust him.

Lord, you call us to join in your work. Teach us to follow, knowing that all who hear the gospel call are hearing you. Make us humble. Help us to listen to your voice. Amen.

SERVANT EVANGELISM

"I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible."
—1 Corinthians 9:19

Paul does not invite us to do whatever people around us do. As many Bible teachers have said, we are to be "in the world but not of the world." Paul did not embrace anything false. He did not condone immorality. He was faithful to Jesus and the gospel. Paul did not needlessly offend. But he did embrace what was beautiful in people's culture and style. He began with people where they were.

One of the hazards of the church in the Western world having a dominant cultural position for so long is that we think spiritual seekers must adapt to our cultural styles rather than that we should adapt to theirs.

One Sunday before worship one of our faithful members asked what the service and message would be like the following Sunday. She had a friend whom she intended to invite to

our church, and she was concerned that the music, worship, and message should make sense to her friend. She was being a "servant" to this friend.

There are many ways to be a "slave to everyone." Through careful listening, spending time together, and praying for discernment, we discover each person's point of need. Then we respond, being all that we can for them through Jesus' love and grace. To whom are you willing to be a servant/slave today?

Lord, give us your wisdom and discernment. Help us to be faithful to you while letting go of our unhelpful customs and cultural styles for the sake of the gospel. In Jesus' name. Amen.

GOLDEN RULE EVANGELISM

"If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt."

—Luke 6:29

These words are hard to hear! What is the best way to respond to the disabled veteran on the corner with his cardboard sign? How much am I influenced by my own selfishness? "I've earned it; it's mine!" Jesus calls us to witness through our generosity: "Do to others as you would have them do to you."

We have learned that "random acts of kindness" and serving the "least of these" in the community are powerful ways of authenticating the gospel. In fact, that is the gospel. The gospel is both word and deed.

We must begin by understanding that we are only stewards of the blessings God has allowed us to have. Everything we have belongs to God. Along with this awareness comes the trust that God is our provider and will supply our needs. So sharing becomes an act of trust

in God. It becomes an opportunity to more directly experience God's generosity to us.

What a blessing we experience when we do share! There is so much joy in giving away. And even more so when our right hand does not know what our left hand is doing (see Matthew 6:3-4). As you join Jesus in his mission, be aware of the hungry, thirsty, and under-clothed. As you generously share, discover Christ in those moments.

Lord, you know how many times we have ignored the hungry, the poor, and other hurting people who have crossed our paths. Forgive us. Give us your discernment to know how to share your love today. Amen.

SEEING AS JESUS SEES

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless —Matthew 9:36

Both of us grew up on the western coast of the United States. Alongside a thriving dairy industry were many seasonal berry crops to be harvested. Every summer truckloads of seasonal workers came north to work on the harvest. It was a way of life so familiar that we barely acknowledged the tough living conditions in some of the camps. We saw it on the surface but just drove by. We picked strawberries in rows right next to seasonal workers. But we did not really see with Jesus' eyes how difficult their lives were.

Yet Jesus took it all in. He knew their heartaches, anxieties and frustration. The poor conditions in some of the camps broke his heart.

A church planter we know prayed that Jesus would help him really see the people of his community where he was

called to plant a church. As he spent the day "prayerwalking," Jesus opened the eyes of his heart. He spent the day walking and weeping at the brokenness he saw. That day he was forever bonded in love with the people of that neighborhood.

Yes, Jesus sees "the crowds," but also knows each of his sheep by name as he calls them into his love and grace. If we ask, Jesus will open our eyes to see people around us as he sees them. Be ready to have your heart broken. Things will never look the same.

Lord, help us to see with our hearts the people around us who are suffering or facing injustice. Give us the love and courage to become their advocates and friends. Amen.

SERVING THROUGH PRAYER

In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy . . .

—Philippians 1:4

Paul served others through prayer. We know of no more effective way to serve others than through prayer. It's the foundation of our response to Jesus' calling.

At a weekday church event, we noticed a young mother's tear-filled eyes and offered to pray for her. Her husband was a soldier deployed in Iraq. We laid hands on her and prayed for the family and her husband's battalion at church on the following Sunday and at other worship services. Months later, after we had moved, we heard that the family was attending our former church. More recently, while visiting that church, a man who was practicing with the worship team came up to us to say, "I'm the soldier you prayed for."

Nearly everyone will respond positively to your offer to pray for them. We suggest these steps:

- Ask God to help you see and understand the people in your life with whom you have regular contact.
- As God lays certain names on your heart, commit to praying for them regularly.
- Be sensitive to seeing them with Jesus' eyes, taking note of what you see and experience.
- Humbly, simply let them know they are among the people you pray for. Invite them to name more specific prayer requests.
- Within a week, find opportunity to follow up.

Lord, people are hungry for prayer. Open our eyes to see the people among our contacts who need you. Help us to touch others with your compassion and love. Amen.

OUT OF THE SALTSHAKER, INTO THE WORLD

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?"
—Matthew 5:13

First challenge: Jesus calls his followers salt. Salt is meant to flavor food. It does no good in the saltshaker. Until it is shaken out and mixed into food, it is of little value.

God's missionary people are meant to add flavor to the world (John 17:15-16). The comfortable way to live is the easy way, to stay encircled by like-minded Christians in holy huddles. But that is also the way to stifle our growth.

Nothing keeps us praying and diving deep into God's Word like being with the "harassed and helpless" (Matthew 9:36) who are seeking after God. As we build relationships with seekers, we discover they are people whom God loves too. We are also drawn into a closer and deeper relationship with Christ as we share Christ's life and love with them.

Second Challenge: We are to remain salty and flavorful. Working with people who have not yet experienced Jesus' transforming love and grace, we see the power of addictions and the ugliness of sin. We are then driven to and not away from Christ, who keeps us salty by his Spirit in us. We are led to righteous anger at the false promises and seduction of the materialistic, hedonistic culture that seeks to deceive and enslave us.

How is your saltiness today?

Lord, some of us know you. Others do not. May your Spirit enlighten, transform, and fill us in a way that flavors a world in need of you today. Amen.

"THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE"

"You are the light of the world Let your light shine before others"
—Matthew 5:14-16

Give children flashlights in a dark place, and they will be entertained for a long time. Light has amazing properties. It travels about 186,000 miles per second. It is also powerful—especially when we speak of the light of Jesus Christ, "the light of all people" that shines into and overcomes the darkness of our world (John 1:4-5).

Jesus calls us to be light, to shine like stars in the world. How do we do that? Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, states Philippians 2:15 of our Scripture this way: "Go out into the world uncorrupted, a breath of fresh air in this squalid and polluted society. Provide people with a glimpse of good living and of the living God."

Mother Teresa shone for Jesus in the darkness of poverty in India. A friend who spends time with the dying and their families is

light in the darkness of pain and grief. The mentor to a fatherless child is a light in the darkness of loneliness and bewilderment. The worker who takes time to listen to a coworker and offer support is a light in the darkness of discouragement and despair.

There are many ways to be a light for Jesus. May our lives shine so brightly through Christlike behaviors and attitudes that others will ask where our life and love come from—and of course the answer is Christ, our Savior.

Lord, sometimes our light dims in the world. Bring us back to the source, to you, the light of the world. May we shine brightly wherever you have placed us. Amen.

BE A POSITIVE KINGDOM INFLUENCE

"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast . . . mixed into . . . flour until it [is] worked all through the dough." —Matthew 13:33

Jesus invites us to imagine the amazing properties of a little bit of yeast; it can make dough rise so that it bakes into wonderful bread. Like yeast, only a small expression of the kingdom of Jesus Christ in our lives can make an incredible impact on the lives and culture of people around us.

Christ-followers have a choice. We can withdraw and live separate lives from our surrounding communities. Or we can choose to influence and bless those communities by encouraging values and behaviors of justice, mercy, and peace.

Yeast is at first not very noticeable. And the word in our verse that says yeast is "mixed into" can also mean "hidden in." Our best influence is often through quiet actions of service and love by which we are not drawing attention to ourselves.

We know of several new churches that have begun in prisons. As they quietly gather for worship and bring people into the presence of Jesus, positive influences spread out through the prison system, transforming behaviors, systems, and the culture of the entire place.

Yeast has a purpose of interacting with dough. We have a purpose of living out the values of the kingdom of Jesus Christ as we interact with the people, institutions, and communities where we are. By the power of the Spirit we can have amazing influence for the glory of God.

Lord, thank you for your generosity. While we offer you our service, you offer us life. You can use us to meet the needs of others around us. Grow us as you will. Amen.

AROMATIC CHRISTIANS

We are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved . . . an aroma that brings life.

—2 Corinthians 2:15-16

Consistently, surveys that analyze how Christians in North America are viewed by others come up with unfortunate findings. Christians are often known as judgmental. Rather than being known for daring to be different and making a positive impact our communities through behaviors of love, forgiveness, and peace-building, people experience our criticism and negativity. That is not a pleasing aroma.

Yet we Christians are recipients of grace. We have known God's incredible forgiveness and radical acceptance. Every one of us is a lost child who has experienced the hug and kiss of our heavenly Father through Jesus Christ. Jesus told the story of the lost son to let us know the heart of our missionary God. It explains Jesus' purpose and why he endured the criticism

of religious leaders to spend time with "tax collectors and sinners." (Matthew 9:11). Jesus was being the "aroma that brings life."

We too can follow his example. There are many ways to be sweet-smelling Christians. Through his Spirit we can live out Christ's radical love and acceptance of others. Think about your relationships. How do people see you? Are you the "aroma of Christ"? Do others experience kindness, hospitality, forgiveness, and encouragement from you?

Lord, only you can replace our sinfulness with your pleasing aroma. Help us connect with you daily through your Word, so we can show your grace and mercy to others. Amen.

THE WITNESS OF UNITY

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."
—John 13:35

Hypocrisy—saying one thing and doing another—gets us into deep trouble. This is often seen in the lack of love and unity shown between Christians and in Christian churches. Hypocrisy severely damages our witness. Jesus' plea is clear that we "may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know" that God loves them.

Churches have often acted as if they were in competition with one another, with lots of critique and judgment. At the same time, we preach a gospel of love and acceptance.

Increasingly we recognize that our real competitors are the false, enslaving gods of our culture. Christians and churches are finding each other across denominational lines and traditions, appreciating one another's sincere desire to follow Christ in his mission.

It is important to understand the difference between "unity" and "uniformity." It is easy for Christians to confuse the two. We may also think that simply by gathering together we are expressing unity. But the witness-authenticating kind of unity for which Jesus prays is love for each other. By the genuine, practiced behaviors of love, others will know we are Jesus' disciples.

People can tell the real thing when they see it. Whom have you taken time to love today?

Lord, we pray that the world will see our love for each other as individuals and churches in a way that cannot deny your power. Help us to support and build one another up. Amen.

THE STRENGTH OF COMMUNITY

In Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.
—Romans 12:5

Jesus challenges his followers to make disciples (Matthew 28:19). He calls them to communal activities of “baptizing” and “teaching” others about him. As followers of Christ, the accountability and nurture we receive together in Christ’s body is what keeps the salt salty, the light shining brightly, and the mission on track.

We are at our best as Christ’s missionaries when we engage our neighborhoods and communities as the body of Jesus Christ—the church. Some in the body are gifted at articulating the gospel in compelling ways. Others have incredible networking skills to develop deep relationships throughout the community. Others have gifts of teaching, service, hospitality, and more. All are needed.

Evangelistic, small-group Bible studies are great ways to engage in Christ’s mission. When

a seeker has multiple relationships with several in the group, the probability of their participation is greatly increased. In these groups the diverse gifts of hospitality, prayer, evangelism, and teaching can be mobilized in harmony and supportive ways. This kind of mission engagement is fun and exciting.

Jesus says, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21). We are a missionary people, a missionary church. Nothing contributes to inspiring worship and growth in Christ like engaging together in Jesus’ mission. Pray that we keep that focus and priority.

Lord, we are created within and for community. May we join together as salt and light in this world. Amen.

OUR PATIENT AND ACTIVE MISSIONARY GOD

The Lord . . . is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.
—2 Peter 3:9

In his mission, God exercises a patient love as well as a vigorous engagement to defeat Satan and the forces of evil. Already in Genesis 3:15 God's promise looks ahead to Jesus' victory over Satan.

We grow impatient and sometimes despair of evil and its effects in the world around us. But the apostle Paul writes, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (Romans 16:20).

The final, great victory of Jesus over evil is described in Revelation 20:10: "The devil . . . was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur" to remain there forever.

In the meantime, be aware, says Paul, that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers

of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12).

That is why we need to "be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power" (6:10).

God is not forgetting us. Our merciful, patient, and powerful God is moving forward with his mission for the salvation of the people he loves.

Hold on to Jesus' promise: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Lord, make us aware of the spiritual battles we are waging. Give us freedom from fear and the sure knowledge that you are in control and that your grace is sufficient for us. Amen.

NOW IS THE TIME

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors . . . We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. —2 Corinthians 5:20

"Appeal." "Implore." "Urge." "Now is the time." Do you hear the urgency in these words? While our missionary God is patient, desiring the salvation of all, the Bible makes clear that this mission of God is moving toward a definite end. This is an urgent mission. It is front and center for Christians and the church. "Now is the time" to share the good news that tells how people can be reconciled to God.

Always keep the reality of Jesus' return in mind. He will come back someday. Jesus makes clear that it is none of our business to try to determine the precise time. "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority" (Acts 1:7). Jesus, God's own Son, intentionally removes himself from that knowledge and states that only the Father knows (Mark 13:32). And he

calls us instead to be active in his mission.

Are you holding off on responding to Jesus' call as he calls you by name? We "urge" you. Listen to his voice today. Know the heart of God, who sent Jesus to seek and save the lost. Receive his love for you in Jesus Christ!

If you are already a Christ-follower, don't hesitate to share Christ with someone and begin building a relationship with them. Tomorrow may be too late: "Now is the time."

Lord, forgive us if we have wasted time and ignored your urgent call. Give us boldness in our relationships with others. May we share your good news in your time. Amen.

A READY TESTIMONY

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

One of life's hard-learned lessons is the importance of preparation. Whether it is for a test at school, training for athletic activities, readying for a job interview, or sharing the good news of life in Jesus Christ—preparation is huge.

Preparation for engaging in Jesus' daily mission begins with Peter's wise counsel: "In your hearts revere Christ as Lord." Our effectiveness depends on a deep and intimate relationship with Jesus. We must be fully devoted followers of Jesus.

In the surrounding context of this verse, Peter emphasizes godly living. He calls us to "be compassionate and humble," "do good; seek peace and pursue it," and keep "a clear conscience." Practicing godly behavior each day is part of the preparation that will yield fruit-

ful opportunities to share the good news with others.

Peter reveals the key to evangelism. When Jesus is at the center of our lives, others will see a difference. They will see a joy and hopefulness about life and may eventually ask why. If we are prepared, we can give the reason for our hope and joy.

Prayerfully surrender to the Lord. As you put Jesus first in your life, pray that you will be sensitive, prepared by his Spirit to "get it" when someone asks you that key question. Be prepared to give the reason for your faith, hope, and joy.

Lord, may I be a living testimony to your goodness and grace. By your Spirit, prepare me to hear and answer people's key questions about faith. Amen.

IT'S ALL ABOUT LOVE—GOD'S LOVE

"God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

—John 3:16

Whether you have been reading these devotions every day, or if today is the first time, this is the heart of the gospel story about Jesus and his mission. "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

We neither can nor need to earn God's favor in any way. God seeks and finds us. He sent his Son, Jesus, into our world, taking on our flesh as a fully human friend, brother, and Savior. And purely by grace, with no contribution on our part, Jesus paid the price for our sin.

Forgiveness and peace with God are pure gifts of grace. "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). You do not pay for a gift you receive. God, who is a "fountain of sending love" (David Bosch), bestows that gift

on you when you receive Jesus as your Savior and Lord.

How do you know when it is true for you?

I (Lynn) recall sharing these words with someone who was seeking Jesus and is now a pastor. Paul says that when we cry out to and seek the Father God, his Spirit is already in us testifying that we are in fact, his child (see Romans 8:15-16).

Lord, we are overwhelmed at how much you love us. Help us gratefully to receive your gift of salvation, forgiveness, and grace. Then help us to pass it along to others. Amen.

KNOW AND TELL THE WHOLE STORY

In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son

—Hebrews 1:2

The gospel story can be told narrowly, emphasizing only the center of salvation history: Jesus' incarnation—the Word become flesh, Jesus' life and teaching, Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, Jesus' victorious resurrection, and Jesus' ascension and rule at the right hand of God till he comes again.

Yet as Paul writes in Colossians, the gospel, centered in the life of Jesus, has cosmic proportions. This Jesus "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created He is before all things and in him all things hold together." This cosmic Christ is Lord not only of our lives but over all creation. Creation too "will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:21).

The gospel of Jesus is about the whole story of creation and how this world belongs to God. It is about the impact on creation of humankind's fall into sin. It is about Christ's redemptive work, which redeems not only individuals but an entire creation that groans under the weight of sin. Ultimately, the gospel story is about the restoration of all things in a new heaven and new earth. So when we accept Jesus' promise of salvation and follow him, we become part of his kingdom, a here and now kingdom that will someday continue in a new heaven and new earth. Are you part of this story and kingdom?

Lord of creation, King of the universe, we bow before you, the one Savior. Teach us to worship and adore you. Thank you for loving us so much. Amen.

CARPE DIEM—“SEIZE THE DAY”

Be very careful, then, how you live . . . making the most of every opportunity . . .
—Ephesians 5:15-16

Today is ripe with new opportunities to show and share Christ's love through our lives. It's an adventure to live as God's holy people, called to be purified through the work of the Holy Spirit in us. We live as robust, full-of-life Christians who radiate the fruit of the Holy Spirit in us: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23).

"Be very careful" to do this, because there are many seductive voices and temptations encouraging us *not* to follow Christ, but instead to serve ourselves and to find life's meaning in possessions, position, and power. Be prepared instead to seize and redeem opportunities to live like Jesus, to be an ambassador sharing his truth and love.

One meaning of *carpe* is "gather." As our missionary God is "gath-

ering his people" (the family of God, the body of Christ, the church), we have the privilege of joining in that effort to "gather" each day Jesus' growing family.

There is no greater joy than seeing someone we love experience the "hug and kiss" of our God as he welcomes home another child who has been lost. Let God show you the persons he wants you to help him "gather" today.

Lord, we are humbled at your invitation to join you in gathering your children into your kingdom. Fill us with your love for others as we remember what you have done for us. Amen.

SHARING IN HEAVEN'S JOY

"There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."
—Luke 15:7

Jesus' lifestyle offended the religious leaders of his day. "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them," they said. So Jesus stated his purpose and priority: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32).

In Luke 15 Jesus tells three stories to reveal the heart and priority of God expressed in his mission. All attention is given for one lost sheep and a thorough, constant search for a missing coin. All of heaven rejoices for every positive response to Jesus' call. And notice the invitation extended: "Rejoice with me!"

The compelling story of the lost son ends with the father saying, "We had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." Harvest joy is awesome!

Every day you and I and the churches we know set priorities. And it's so tempting to give in to our consumer culture that says, "Me first." Will you instead join Jesus in the priorities of his mission?

May harvest joy and the vision of that great day inspire you, when people from every nation, tribe, people, and language will exclaim, "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (Revelation 7:10). All "praise and glory . . . be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" (7:12).

Lord Jesus, we look forward to the day when we will see you coming again to live with us forever. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen!

this month

Jesus, Lord of All

Hernandes Dias Lopes

The birth of Jesus was the fulfillment of many ancient prophecies. He was born in the fullness of time (Galatians 4:4), as outlined in the agenda of eternity. His coming into the world is good news of great joy for all people (Luke 2:10). Jesus is the Savior of the world, the promised Messiah, the Lord of the universe. There is no salvation in any other name. He is the way to full life, the gateway to heaven, the bread to calm our hunger, the water to quench our thirst, the peace to soothe our hearts, the only mediator to reconcile us with God.

Scripture is filled with many different names and descriptions of our Savior. Each opens a window to understanding the significance of Christ's birth. This month we'll explore the many facets of Jesus' identity to discover just how amazing he really is. Read and reflect on the following messages, and come to know God in the person of his one and only Son!

Rev. Hernandes Dias Lopes grew up in a Christian home in Brazil. Following his 1981 graduation from Seminário Presbiteriano do Sul in Campinas, Brazil, he served two congregations of the Presbyterian Church in Brazil. In 2000, he earned a doctor of ministry degree from Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi. Rev. Lopes has been the voice of the television program Verdade e Vida ("Truth and Life") since 2006. In 2010 he was appointed Portuguese ministry leader for Back to God Ministries International. Rev. Lopes and his wife, Tina, have two college-age children.

JESUS, THE MESSIAH

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."
—Luke 2:14

When Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem, the angel of the Lord announced to the shepherds who were keeping watch over their flocks nearby, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."

Jesus, meaning "Savior," is the name the angel had told Joseph to give him (Matthew 1:21; Luke 2:21). And Christ, or Messiah, meaning "Anointed One," points to his mission as the deliverer of God's people, the true King who rules in righteousness, reigning wisely and doing what is just and right in all things (Jeremiah 23:5-6).

The Father had promised him, and the prophets had announced him. The festivities and rituals of the Old Testament

pointed to his arrival and his mission. Christmas is the celebration of eternity being realized in time, of heaven coming to earth, of God becoming human, of the Son of God becoming Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah.

This Jesus is the hope of all the nations and Savior of the world. He is living water to the thirsty and bread from heaven for those who are starving. He wields the power of God in the church, in the universe and throughout eternity (Ephesians 1). He is our refuge, our peace, the reason for our hope.

Do you know him?

Thank you, Lord, for the love you have shown in the humble birth of Jesus, our Savior. In him our hope is renewed. In Christ we praise you. Amen.

JESUS, THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

"My eyes have seen your salvation . . . a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel." —Luke 2:30, 32

The baby who was born in the manger in Bethlehem, the young man who grew up in a carpentry shop in Nazareth, and the man who died on the cross in Jerusalem are one and the same. This is Jesus, the light of the world. Jesus is the sun of justice and the bright morning star. He is the light that illuminates humanity—for humanity, with all its wisdom, is cradled in darkness. But Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

Without Jesus, people are still held captive in the empire of darkness. Even though they may be refined by culture and filled with a sense of intense religiosity, they are still held prisoners of deceit. But Jesus came to liberate us from the realm of night. He is the light of the

world, and those who follow him do not walk in darkness; rather, their life is like the light of a new dawn that shines brighter and brighter till it breaks forth into a perfect day.

When Jesus, through his Spirit, comes into your life, you are transformed and you receive a new heart, a new mind, a new name, a new family, and a new citizenship. You become a child of the light, you live in the light, and you walk safely and securely toward the light of heaven.

My Lord and my God,
you are the true light that
can illumine my soul.
Please dissipate every
cloud that has blurred
my vision and has held
me in darkness. In your
name, Amen.

JESUS, THE BREAD OF LIFE

"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

—John 6:35

Hunger is a harsh reality. Millions of people go to bed each night with their stomachs growling. Millions of children, with bloated abdomens and ribs showing, compete with vultures in landfills to get scraps of food.

Starvation is cruel; it tortures and kills. Victor Frankl, who was a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp, said the subject most talked about in prison was not freedom but food.

But even more severe than physical hunger is spiritual hunger. Where can we find true food for our souls?

Jesus is the bread of life! He alone can satisfy our spiritual cravings.

No religion, philosophy, or doctrine can do that. No work of charity can satisfy your soul. Only Jesus can fully satisfy.

Many people seek to satisfy the soul with money, success, fame, or pleasure, but there is a God-shaped void in everyone's soul that can only be filled by Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the bread that came down from heaven. If you embrace Jesus by faith, you will discover that he fills the emptiness within your life. You will be satisfied forever by the bread of life!

Have you asked the Lord for your daily bread today, and have you come to him for the nourishment of your soul?

Heavenly Father, all praise and worship belong to you, for you give me the food I needed to satisfy my spiritual hunger. Only in Christ can I find eternal satisfaction. In Jesus' name, Amen.

JESUS, THE GOOD SHEPHERD

"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me . . . I lay down my life for the sheep." —John 10:14-15

Psalm 23, one of the best-known passages of the Bible, presents the Lord as the great shepherd who cares for his sheep—and Jesus declared that he is that shepherd.

The preceding psalm, Psalm 22, describes prophetically many details of Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus connected his death to this psalm as he cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1; Mark 15:34). (See also Psalm 22:7-18, 22-25.)

Jesus is the good and supreme shepherd. He died in our place so that we could have eternal life with God.

As the good shepherd, he gives us provision, direction, and fellowship. He is the one who leads us to green pastures and still waters. He is the one who guides us in righteousness and walks with

us through dark times. He is the one who gives us victory over our enemies. (See Psalm 23.)

He promises to walk with us here and to receive us when we leave this life and go to live with him (John 14:1-2).

As the supreme shepherd, Jesus will return in majesty and glory, and he will bring his glorious kingdom to fill the whole earth and make it new (Revelation 21:1-7).

Are you one of Jesus Christ's sheep? Do you hear his voice? Are you ready to follow him?

Eternal God, I have relief, peace, and security, knowing that you are my shepherd. Help me submit to your will and rest entirely in your care. In your name I pray. Amen.

JESUS, THE GATE FOR THE SHEEP

*Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep."
—John 10:7*

Jesus, the Son of God, said of himself, "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture."

Jesus is the gate of salvation. There is salvation in no other name but in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:12).

He is the way to God. "I am the way and the truth and the life," he said. "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Jesus is the only "mediator between God and human beings" (1 Timothy 2:5).

He is the gate to heaven and the door of liberation. Whoever enters through this door is not a prisoner, but finds true freedom. Jesus said, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).

There are doors that will lead you into captivity, into prison, into despair. Those doors lead to all sorts of sin and eventually to death.

But Jesus is the door through which you can find abundant provision and freedom.

When you enter through this door, you will find green pastures and a full, abundant, joy-filled life. Jesus came to give you abundant life. He is true life.

Right now you can experience this eternal life. Superlative, abundant, eternal life! Are you ready to truly live?

O God, all the "freedoms" we try outside of Jesus turn into slavery. Help us to find freedom in Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

JESUS, OUR GREAT GOD AND SAVIOR

They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"
—Mark 4:41

As the apostle Paul says, Jesus is "our great God and Savior" (Titus 2:13). He rules over all the nations of the world; he directs the course of history. He has power in heaven, on earth, and over hell.

Mark provides several examples of this truth when he relates in rapid succession four miracles that Jesus, our great God and Savior, performed.

Jesus calmed the sea, demonstrating his power over nature. He freed a man who was possessed by a legion of demons, showing his authority over the forces of evil. Jesus healed a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years, revealing his power over sickness. Then he brought a twelve-year-old girl back to life, showing his power over death. (See Mark 4:35-5:43.)

Jesus has power over creation, over the realms of darkness, over illness, and over death. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," he said (Matthew 28:18).

For Jesus, every problem has a solution. If you are desperate and in the grip of problems that are greater than your strength, give them to Jesus right now.

He is mighty to forgive, save, comfort, and console. You can trust him. He is our great God and Savior!

Almighty Lord, please take in your mighty hands every weight that has caused pain and suffering in my life. Strengthen me to trust you, for all power and authority are in you. In your name, Amen.

JESUS, FRIEND OF SINNERS

"The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is proved right by her actions." —Matthew 11:19

Jesus is the greatest expression of God's love for you and me. God loves us and sent his only Son into the world to give us eternal life (John 3:16).

Jesus is full of compassion. He became a friend of sinners and ate with tax collectors, who were seen as traitors and thieves.

He visited the homes of people rejected by society. He embraced children, touched lepers, healed the sick, raised paralyzed people from their beds, and gave sight to the blind. Jesus fed the hungry and raised the dead.

Jesus also has compassion and concern for each one of us.

He knows your pain, sees your tears, and listens to your cries. He knows your past and sees your future. He knows your feelings and reads all your

thoughts. He knows your fears and guides your dreams.

Come to Jesus and place your life at his feet. He cares about you, loves you, and died for you. He was raised from the dead for your justification, and is now in heaven interceding for you (Romans 4:25; 8:34).

One day he will return for you. He wants to give you a happy and abundant life, right now and for eternity.

Beloved Father, even when my heart was marked by spiritual misery, you never stopped loving me. I thank you because you welcomed me with open arms through the saving love of Christ. Amen.

THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE

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

The city of Jerusalem was bustling with activity because Passover had arrived and pilgrims were flowing into the city. The Jewish leaders were stirred up and looking for a way to arrest Jesus. This was the day when blood, sweat, tears, and cries of pain would flow from Gethsemane. On this day the betrayal of Judas and the denial of Peter would be more painful for Jesus than the spitting and derision of the rulers. The disciples' hearts were disturbed, but Jesus urged them to trust in him and to lift their eyes to behold the glories of heaven.

In confusion and doubt, Thomas said, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" But Jesus gently responded, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Jesus is not simply one way among many; he is the only way. Jesus is not just a truth; he is the only truth. Jesus is the life that satisfies.

If you want to live with God, Jesus is the way. If you want to know the truth, Jesus is the truth. If you want to experience real life, Jesus is the life.

Come to Jesus today, and experience his fullness.

Lord God, many people believe that all paths lead to you because they are surrounded by the teachings and theories of today's world. But salvation is found only in Jesus, the way to find the truth and eternal life. For his sake and in his name we pray. Amen.

JESUS, THE RIGHTEOUS ADVOCATE

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. —1 John 1:9

The apostle John says, “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.”

Jesus Christ is the advocate of lost causes, and there are three reasons for this.

The first reason is that he is just. Because of his character, sin was never a part of his nature, and no malice ever came from his lips.

The second reason is in the methods he uses. As your advocate, Jesus not only comes to be by your side but also to serve in your place—to be your replacement. Jesus did not come to plead his innocence but to take on your guilt. Jesus did not come, like a human lawyer would, to charge legal fees for taking on your case. He came to

pay the price for your redemption—and he paid with his perfect life. Jesus Christ, as your advocate, can save you completely because after he died for you, he rose from the dead and is now ruling at God’s right hand, where he intercedes for you.

There is also a third reason: Jesus is the advocate of lost causes because his work is effective. He has never lost a case, and he never will.

Lord God, holy and righteous are your ways!
I thank you because,
through Jesus, I have forgiveness for everything
that separates me from you.
So I confess my sin,
in his name. Amen.

JESUS, THE ONLY MEDIATOR

"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved." —Acts 4:12

Is it possible for us as sinners to have fellowship with a holy God?

How can we, being just dust and ashes, be reconciled with the Creator of the universe?

How can we, sinful human beings, have access to the throne of God?

The Christian faith is not a path open to us from earth to heaven, but a path opened by God from heaven to earth. In Christ, God reconciled the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19). There is only one mediator between God and human-kind—and that mediator is Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5).

Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one can go to the Father except through him (John 14:6). Jesus is the new and living path that leads you to God.

Jesus said, "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in . . . and find pasture" (John 10:9).

Jesus is the way to salvation, to abundant provision, and to liberation. He is the bridge that connects you to God.

He is the ultimate high priest who mediates between you and God. No church, no religion, no sacred rite, aside from Jesus Christ, can reconcile you with God.

Christ is the only mediator.

Have you surrendered yourself to him?

Dear God, deliver me from the legalistic requirements I often set on myself. Help me surrender totally to Christ as my only Savior. Through him I pray. Amen.

JESUS, THE WATER OF LIFE

"Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."
—John 4:14

Jesus was passing through a village in Samaria. In the agenda of heaven, he had an appointment with the woman he met at the well there. She had had five husbands. After going through five divorces, she was now living with a lover.

Jesus knew her background, and he asked her for some water from the well of Sychar. She answered bluntly, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?"

Jesus said to her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." He went on, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them

a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

In this picture, physical water symbolizes the material things of this world that seem appealing but really don't satisfy. We may sip it to the last drop, but the thirst of our soul is not quenched.

But Jesus fully satisfies. He is the water of life. If you drink this water, a fountain of eternal life will flow within you. If you are willing, come and drink, and your soul will be quenched and revived by his Spirit.

Dear Lord, may I always drink from the water of life. Keep me away from spiritual pollution and its temptations offered to me every day. Only you can fully satisfy my thirst. In Christ, Amen.

JESUS, THE WORD OF GOD

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. —John 1:14

Jesus is the eternal, personal, and divine Word of God. The apostle John says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Jesus is the creative Word of God. Through him God made all things, and nothing that has been made was made without him. He is the life, and he alone has the authority to give life. He is the light of the world, the true light that illuminates every person. Jesus is the Word made flesh who lived among us. Jesus is God clothed in human skin.

In him, the eternal became tangible in time, the divine became human and came down from heaven to earth. Jesus is “full of grace and truth.” In him the Father’s glory shines in all its brilliance.

In Jesus dwells the fullness of divinity. He himself said it: “My sheep listen to my voice. . . . I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one” (John 10:27-30).

Jesus came to reveal God. He is the exact expression of God (Hebrews 1:3). Jesus is God among us; he is God for us and “God with us” (Matthew 1:23).

Father God, Jesus is the most beautiful statement of your love for lost people. Taking on our flesh, he identified with us and shared our pain. Thank you, Jesus. Amen.

JESUS, THE TRUE REFUGE

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."
—Matthew 11:28

Life is not a summer camp but a battlefield full of struggles.

In this long and hard journey, you may be distressed and tired. Maybe you are groaning under the weight of a virtual steamroller of anguish, and you just do not know what to do.

Jesus says, "Do not despair; come to me."

He is your refuge, and he invites you to a refreshing time of trust and fellowship.

He can relieve you of that heavy burden, remove grief from your heart, and heal your wounds.

He invites you to share a personal experience: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

Jesus' command is for you: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me." To do this re-

quires a commitment to submit and learn.

Jesus even repeats his promise to you: not only does he say, "I will give you rest," but he also says, "You will find rest" for your soul.

Do not walk hunched over under the weight of despair. Turn to Jesus, because he has the power to relieve you of your burdens and carry you in his omnipotent arms.

Always remember that the Son of God is our only true refuge.

Lord God, I need to be healed by you. I admit that I have looked for other ways to satisfy my heart, but without success. Only you are the true refuge. In your name, Amen.

JESUS, LORD OF LORDS

At the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.
—Philippians 2:10-11

Jesus is the name above every name. He is King of kings and Lord of lords.

Because “he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross,” God the Father highly exalted him and gave him the greatest of all names. Before him every knee shall bow, in heaven, on earth, and under the earth.

Jesus holds the reins of history in his hands. He rules the nations. He raises kings and dethrones them. He raises kingdoms and destroys them. Angels, human beings, and demons bow at his feet.

The kings and their servants, the thinkers and the ignorant, the religious and the atheists—all bow before him.

That baby lying in the manger was destined to inherit the throne of David—even more, to

be raised up to the throne above all thrones and to reign absolute over the entire universe.

Because he is the King of all kings, we must bow at his feet and give him the glory due his name.

Because he is the Lord of all lords, we must be faithful servants, submissive and obedient to his orders.

Because he is the everlasting Lord who saves us and gives us eternal life, we praise his name forever!

Sovereign God, the lordship of Christ leads me to bow gladly before him and feeds my hope that he will always be with me. In his name I thank you. Amen.

JESUS, THE LAMB OF GOD

John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" —John 1:29

Jesus is the Lamb of God.

That is why he was not born in a palace but in a stable. He was not placed in a golden cradle but in a feedbox lined with straw. He was not born to live in luxury but to suffer and die on a cross in your place and mine.

In the Old Testament, on the night of deliverance from slavery in Egypt, each Israelite family was directed to kill a flawless lamb and to sprinkle its blood on the doorposts of their house. On that fateful night, the plague of death took the life of the first-born son in every household, but it *passed over* the homes that were protected by the blood of the lamb. The Israelites were saved from certain death not by their works but by the blood of the lamb. (See Exodus 12.)

Jesus is our Passover Lamb, the substitute lamb, the Lamb of

God who takes away the sin of the world.

He died in our place. By his death we receive life, and by his blood we are forgiven and accepted as righteous before God the Father.

There is no way we can make our own sins disappear. But the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God, purifies us from all our transgressions and opens for each one of us a new and living way to God.

May you always be praised, my God and Savior, for in Christ, the Lamb, my debt is canceled and the forgiveness of my sins is absolute. In Jesus' name, Amen.

JESUS, THE EVERLASTING FATHER

To us a child is born, to us a son is given . . . And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
—Isaiah 9:6

Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, existed long before he was born on this earth. As God, he does not have a beginning; he is the source of all things.

Before the world existed, he lived in eternal glory and had perfect communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit. He was the Word that was with God in the beginning (John 1:1-2). He was coequal, co-eternal, and consubstantial with God.

He was not created; he is one with the Creator. "Through him all things were made," and nothing that was made was made without him (John 1:3).

The universe was in God's mind before the foundations of the earth were laid. The starry worlds were created by him. He measured the waters of the seas in the hollow of his hand

and weighed the dust of the earth on his precision scale. He called by name each and every one of the stars in the heavens, and none of them is lacking in splendor. He brought into existence the things that did not exist and created everything from nothing, for his glory and our enjoyment.

As our provider and protector, the Son born to us is called Everlasting Father; he loves us and came to save us!

Lord and God, I extend to you all my praise and worship for the security I enjoy in the person of your Son, Jesus Christ, Savior and Everlasting Father. Through him I offer you all honor and glory. Amen.

JESUS, THE PRINCE OF PEACE

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

—John 14:27

The world is marked by sorrow, drenched in blood, wounded by war, and sickened by hatred.

Wars become increasingly bloody and people increasingly violent. There are wars between nations and wars within families. There are tribal wars and religious wars. We are in constant conflict.

Our hearts are often battlefields. We raise monuments to peace and build more and more weapons of destruction. We speak of peace, but we spend more on war. We say that love is the oxygen of life, but we breathe hatred.

In a world marked by violence and conflict in the clutches of sin, Jesus presents himself as the Prince of Peace.

He came not just to talk about peace; he is peace. He came to make peace with his blood

on the cross. He gives us peace with God, because he forgives our sins. He gives us the peace of God, because he relieves the anxiety in our hearts.

He gives us inner peace because wherever Jesus reigns, joy triumphs over sorrow, love prevails over heartache, and hope raises its flag where despair once reigned.

Is your heart filled with the Prince of Peace?

Father, there are many feelings in my heart that have taken away my joy and brought me nothing but loss. I ask that Christ's peace may fill me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

JESUS, THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD

"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

—John 3:16

Popular thinking says that every religion is good and every path leads to God. Many people rely on the religion of their choice for salvation. Others pin their hopes on their works. People tend to believe that if you are sincere, God will find a way to your heart in the final day. The Bible says, however, "There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death" (Proverbs 16:25).

Actually, there is only one way to reach God, and that is through Jesus Christ. There is only one gate into heaven: Jesus Christ. There is only one mediator between God and man: Jesus Christ.

Our text today is one of the most familiar and beloved in all of Scripture. At the heart of John 3:16 is the amazing announcement "God gave" Our God is a giving God. He

gave for us what the Father had only one of—his Son. His unique Son "perished" on Calvary so we might have life. Jesus is the only advocate who can defend your cause before the throne of God. He is the only Savior of the world.

The "one and only" is capable of giving eternal life. He can provide bread for your spiritual hunger and living water to satisfy your spiritual thirst. He offers light to illuminate your way, peace to end your conflicts, and hope to end your despair.

O God, your Word says there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved. Jesus is, therefore, our only hope. May we all put our hope in him. Amen.

JESUS, THE SUN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Jesus . . . said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

—John 8:12

It was night in Bethlehem when Jesus, the Sun of Righteousness, was born. The world lived in darkness and yielded to sin, but when Jesus was born, the light that enlightens everyone beat back the darkness—so that all who were prisoners of sin could be liberated, justified, and guided in the paths of righteousness.

Where the sun shines, the darkness withdraws.

The sun brings light and heat. The sun provides energy and healing.

Jesus Christ is a sun and shield. He gives grace and glory. Jesus illuminates, warms, and purifies.

Christmas is a holiday full of light, for the baby born in Bethlehem is the bright morning star. Christmas is a celebration of salvation, because Jesus Christ is the sun of justice

and righteousness. The Old Testament prophet Malachi announced that "the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays" (Malachi 4:2).

Jesus brings glorious and blessed salvation. When Jesus was born, there was light at midnight; when the Son of God died, there was darkness at noon (Mark 15:33). When the sun of justice enters your life with its shining rays, the darkness of your night is dispelled and you become a child of light.

Illumine my soul, O Lord, with the light of your wonderful splendor, so that I may lead a life that honors you. In Christ. Amen.

JESUS, THE HEAD OF THE CHURCH

In Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority.
—Colossians 2:10

The church is one body, and Jesus is the head of that body. Because Jesus “humbled himself by becoming obedient to death on a cross” to redeem his church, the Father “exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name” (Philippians 2:8-9). God also placed him above all spiritual authorities and strongholds as head of the church.

Jesus is the Savior of the church and its source of life. He came not to rule it with tyranny but to serve it with humility. He is the foundation, the builder, the owner, and the protector of the church.

Jesus loves the church with an everlasting, persevering, sacrificial, and sanctifying love.

And in his strength the church is preparing to present herself to him as a pure, holy, and

glorious bride (Ephesians 5:27; Revelation 21:2).

Are you a part of this body, of which Christ is the head? If you believe in Christ, you are inescapably a member of his church. Don't belittle the wonder of your membership. There are those who dismiss the church as a relic of past history. They think new forms of spirituality have made the church of Christ obsolete. Don't believe it! The church is Christ's body on earth today—his hands and feet to a world in need.

Holy God, I belong wholly to you, in body and soul. What a comfort to know that Christ loves and protects me. Help me to serve as part of his body. Amen.

JESUS, THE ALPHA AND THE OMEGA

"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End."
—Revelation 22:13

In the final verses of the Bible, Jesus describes himself as the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. He promises that he is coming soon, and he offers eternal life for all who wish to take the free gift of the water of life.

Jesus was present at the beginning of creation. He is the Alpha, the beginning. As part of the triune God, he brought into existence the universe with its billions of galaxies filled with stars. Our Lord is the creator of all things visible and invisible; in him and through him and for him all things were made (Colossians 1:16). He is the Alpha, the origin and source of all things.

For him all things converge in the universe.

He is at the core of God's divine decrees. He is the center in all

of creation and redemption. He is the pivot of history itself.

But Jesus is not just the first Word. He is the last. He is the Omega, the consummation and end of all things.

When the curtain falls on cosmic history, Jesus will be there full of glory as the Omega, the end of all things.

From everlasting to everlasting he is God himself, clothed with glory and majesty!

Do you know this Jesus who is the First and the Last?

Because Jesus is in control of my history, Almighty God, I know that he guides my life. Help me to celebrate your goodness, Lord. Turn my adversities into victories, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

JESUS, THE TEACHER OF TEACHERS

The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.

—Mark 1:22

Jesus told his disciples: “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am” (John 13:13). Jesus was called teacher by his followers and also by his enemies. History is full of teachers who have filled libraries with their scholarship, but none of them transformed history as Jesus did.

He taught not only by his words but also by his actions. His teachings themselves were manifestations of power. Both in the way he taught and by the words he taught, he transcended any teacher before him (John 7:46). Listening to him, the crowds glimpsed that he was not just human, but divine!

Jesus’ words brought light to the mind and delight to the heart. He addressed the questions of the soul, salvation, and eternity.

Jesus was not only the greatest of all teachers but also the greatest of all examples. Before condemning him to death, Pilate confessed that he found no crime in him (John 19:6). Jesus’ life serves as a reference to his teachings.

Today, in a world exploding with media options, there are more voices than ever offering to teach us about life. Are you listening to the one Teacher who makes a difference for eternity?

Lord, I want to reflect your holy Word in my attitudes and character, as you have done. I want more than to have knowledge about you; I want to know you and walk with you. In your name, Amen.

JESUS, OUR HOPE

If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all others. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead

—1 Corinthians 15:19-20

The hope of millions of people is dead, crushed by despair. Their eyes are swollen from all the crying. They are wounded by life's setbacks.

People live in this world without hope and without God. They run after one religion or another and only reap disappointment. They run to the banquets of sin and come out feeling even more frustrated.

Eager to find meaning in life, many run to the fountains of adventures and avidly drink from the cups of worldly pleasures, but they feel even more miserable than before.

Against this gray backdrop of despair, Jesus presents himself as our hope.

He is our hope because he died in order to save us. He is our hope because he rose to new life to sanctify us. He is our

hope because he will come back for us to glorify us. Jesus can be the perennial reason for your joy and the secure anchor for your hope.

Already in the Old Testament Isaiah prophesied, "Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint" (Isaiah 40:31).

May your spirit soar today on the wings of Christ's love and grace.

Gracious God, there is no situation that can kill my hope in Christ, not even death. For in him there is life in all circumstances. Through him I give you praise. Amen.

JESUS, THE SON OF GOD

A voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."
—Matthew 3:17

Mary was a poor young woman, engaged to be married to a poor man, living in the impoverished city of Nazareth. One day, the angel Gabriel announced to her that she would be the Savior's mother. The Holy Spirit would descend upon her, and Mary would be the mother of the Son of God (Luke 1:26-38).

At Christmas we celebrate the birth of Christ. But Jesus did not stop being God to become a human being. That baby born in Bethlehem and placed in a humble manger full of straw was the Son of the Most High.

Jesus is the Son of God because he is one with the Father. Whoever knows and loves Jesus knows and loves the Father, because Jesus is the expressed image of God.

But Jesus is also Mary's Son. The "becoming flesh" (incarna-

tion) of the Son of God is a glorious mystery. He who cannot be contained by the confines of the heavens emptied himself and became a baby wrapped in cloths and lovingly placed in a manger.

Why this amazing gift at Christmas? Jesus, the God-Man, came to build a bridge between heaven and earth. Jesus is the mediator between God and his fallen creation.

He's also the bridge between God and you. Do you know this Jesus?

Dear God, as Christmas nears, I confess my belief in Jesus Christ, your only Son. I believe that Jesus is the only way I can come to you. In his name I pray. Amen.

JESUS, IMMANUEL

"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

—Matthew 1:23

Today is Christmas. Jesus came to earth as Immanuel—"God with us." Jesus is God among humankind; he is God dressed in human skin; he is God "pitching his tent" among us, as John 1:14 literally states!

Sin separated us from God, but God took the initiative to come to us. In the tabernacle set up in the wilderness, God dwelled among his people. In the temple of Jerusalem, the presence of God filled the Most Holy Place. But in the fullness of time (Galatians 4:4), God "became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). The eternal entered into time. The divine became human.

The infinite God became a finite infant and was placed in a manger. He who cannot be contained by the confines of the heavens became a child

who would need to grow in wisdom and stature and grace.

Those little words "with us" define the incredible comfort we receive this Christmas Day. This Christmas may find you far from home, or perhaps enduring the first Christmas after losing a loved one. It may seem that the only way to describe your life right now is "lonely"!

Don't believe it! Christmas is here to assure you that, in Christ, God is beside you now and always! He is the "with us" God!

Lord, thank you for being Immanuel—"God with us"! May we celebrate your birth with true joy, knowing that you came to save and sustain us. Come into our hearts today, Lord Jesus! Amen.

JESUS, THE CORNERSTONE

"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed." —Luke 2:34-35

Shortly after Jesus' birth, his earthly parents brought him to the temple to fulfill the Jewish rites of purification. There they met aged Simeon, who prophesied that this baby would "cause the rising and falling of many in Israel."

The image behind Simeon's words is of a rock over which someone might trip. It's odd to think that Jesus causes some people serious problems. But it's true!

After all, Jesus is "the living Stone—rejected by human beings but chosen by God and precious to him." As that precious stone, Jesus is the cornerstone that gives strength and stability to his church. Those who trust in him become living stones in this amazing, living temple of his presence on earth.

But not all people embrace Jesus as that foundation stone. For some, he becomes the stone rejected—the one who causes the "falling" of those who turn their back on his grace.

Those who turn away from Christ might think there are other foundations on which to build a life. They are wrong. Building on any other foundation is like building on sand and heading for sure disaster (see Matthew 7:24-27).

Jesus alone is the Rock of ages.

Blessed Father, since the birth of Jesus, he has been both loved and hated. May my life be built on your solid foundation. I receive him in faith and submission. In his name I pray. Amen.

JESUS, THE PHYSICIAN OF PHYSICIANS

Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons
—Mark 1:34

Jesus healed all kinds of sickness and disease. He went about doing good, offering relief to the weary, peace to the afflicted, liberty to captives, and healing to the sick.

He cleansed the lepers, gave sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, and speech to the mute. He lifted the lame and raised the dead.

He healed diseases of the body and tended the emotions of people that were crushed by life's tragedies. He healed the wounds of the body and lanced the abscesses of the soul.

Jesus wiped the tears of those who were sad, straightened up the downcast, and brought hope to those who lay in the pit of despair.

As the supreme physician, Jesus can cure the diseases that ravage your body and forgive the

sins that torment your soul. He can stop your tears, heal your wounds, and restore your good fortune.

For him, there is no lost cause or nothing too difficult.

He can do whatever he wants, and everything he wants is good.

He is the God of the impossible, the Lord of lost causes, the foundation of our hope.

Has he healed your spirit and restored your soul? (See Psalm 23:3.) Ask him for healing today!

Lord, nothing is impossible with you. You can heal all our diseases, if that is your will. But, most of all, Lord, heal our souls. May we trust in your power and rest in your strength. In your name, Amen.

JESUS, THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even though they die"

—John 11:25

As the author of life and the Lord of history, Jesus came down to earth, entered history, and became flesh to dwell among humankind.

He who was born in a stable and worked in a carpentry shop came to die on a cross, for our sins, to give us eternal life.

But death could not stop him.

By laying down his own life, only to take it up again (John 10:18), he triumphed over death when he rose from the dead.

Jesus took away the sting of death and opened the tomb from the inside out, presenting us the only path to eternal life.

He rose from the dead as "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20). He was first in line, and we will follow in his footsteps.

Now death no longer has the last word for us. Whoever believes in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, will never die, because he is the resurrection and the life.

When Jesus returns in glory and majesty, the dead in Christ will rise with glorified bodies, and those who are alive will be transformed and caught up to meet the Lord in the air (1 Corinthians 15:51-57; 1 Thessalonians 4:17). Though we may not fully understand, we can trust that our Lord will fulfill all these promises in his time.

Holy God, we know that death is not the end of our existence. In Jesus there are eternal delights prepared for all who love you. May you always be praised. In Christ, Amen.

JESUS, OUR PEACE

The punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.
—Isaiah 53:5

World history is the history of wars; wars of kingdoms against kingdoms and nations against nations. People live in constant conflict—almost as walking war machines. We live in conflict with God, with others, and with ourselves.

In this violent world, where quite often our foes can be found in our own homes, Jesus is presented as our peace.

But peace in Jesus is not measured by the absence of conflict or struggle in our lives or in the world around us. Peace is not just a serene feeling or even a pleasant condition.

Our peace is a person; our peace is Jesus Christ. Jesus made the peace, offers the peace, and is the peace. At the heart of this amazing peace-making, as Isaiah tells us, is the love that took upon himself the terrible brokenness of our world!

Through Jesus we have peace *with* God and we have the peace *of* God. Peace with God has to do with our right relationship with God (Romans 5). The peace of God has to do with our hearts and minds being filled with assurance, hope, and contentment in Jesus (Philippians 4:7).

Jesus is the Prince of peace, the ruler of the kingdom of peace, and his subjects are peacemakers. Jesus is the only one who can calm the tempests of the soul, quiet the churning waves of the heart, and lead us safely to divine peace.

Lord, help me to know your peace and to lead lost people to you, the source of life and peace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

JESUS, FIRSTBORN OF CREATION

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.
—Colossians 1:15

The vast, unfathomable universe, which is more than ten billion light years in diameter, with billions of galaxies, did not arise by itself or by accident.

It was designed and created by the one true God.

Scientists tell us that earth is a remarkable planet—with all the components that make this place an environment in which we humans can survive.

Did all that happen by chance?

We would need more faith to believe in the chance of spontaneous generation than the faith to believe that the Lord of the universe is the creator of all.

Jesus is called the firstborn over all creation not because he was the first to be created, as Arius of Alexandria thought, but because he is the source of creation. He brought into exis-

tence what did not exist before. From nothing, our Lord created everything.

Everything was made through him, and “without him nothing was made” (John 1:3). “In him all things were created . . . visible and invisible.” He is the creator and sustainer of the universe. “In him all things hold together.”

And yet, this creator loves you and me.

What a marvelous God we worship! What a gracious Savior we praise!

Eternal God, thank you that Jesus Christ is the center of all things. Ultimate power is in his hands. Leaning on him, I have refuge and strength. His is the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

JESUS, NAME ABOVE ALL NAMES

To all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. —John 1:12

Christmas tells the story of the birth of the greatest person who ever lived. That baby, born in Bethlehem, grew up in Nazareth and died in Jerusalem.

But that wasn't the end.

He rose again, returned to heaven, and is now ruling at God's right hand. His name is Jesus Christ.

After his humiliation and death on the cross, he was exalted "above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth" (Philippians 2:9-10). All angels, demons, and human beings must bow to his glory.

Jesus is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He sits on the throne of the universe and holds the reins of history in his hands.

He triumphed over the devil and his hosts and holds the keys of death and hell.

Before him, kings and servants, serfs and masters, powerful and meek need to bow down and recognize that he is Lord.

Jesus has all the authority and power in heaven and on earth. His power is irresistible, his kingdom is eternal, and his glory is incomparable.

To him be all glory forever and ever!

Lord, as this year ends, may I bow down and worship the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Jesus, name above all names, thank you for saving me. In your name I pray. Amen.

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