



Jan/Feb 2017

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew

*Ruth and Esther:  
Wise Living Far  
from Home*

ALSO: THE GREATEST STORIES EVER TOLD

Friends:

Can you imagine having your wallet and phone stolen while visiting in a foreign country? Your identification, passport, cash, bank cards—gone!—and with no means to call for assistance. Imagine being left with nothing but the clothes on your back, lost in a place where you couldn't even read the signs. I, as a middle-aged white guy, might have the privilege of at least being recognized as a clueless tourist. People might show hospitality to me out of pity. But what if I were part of a despised class of citizens? What if people assumed I were a thief or a homeless person? Being powerless in a foreign land can be both frightening and dangerous.



In January, Arie Leder explores the stories of two biblical women who navigate that cliff-edge of being powerless in a foreign land. They act wisely and rely on God's strength in distressing situations.

Then in February, Art Schoonveld turns our attention to the parables of Jesus, showing how Christ illuminated the kingdom of God with real-life stories. These are the greatest stories ever told.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

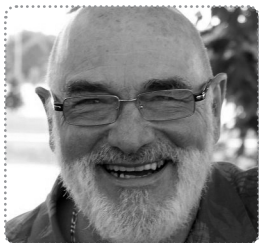
A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Steven Koster". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

—Steven Koster

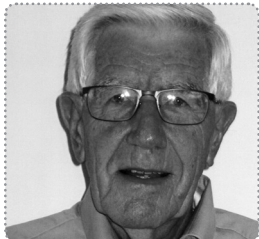
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**“Ruth and Esther: Wise Living Far from Home”**  
Arie Leder



**“The Greatest Stories Ever Told”**  
Arthur J. Schoonveld

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**ReFrame**  
Media

# january

## Ruth and Esther: Wise Living Far from Home

**Arie Leder**

Two Old Testament books feature the lives of two remarkable women who lived far from their homeland—Ruth and Esther. This month we will reflect on their stories. The story of Ruth, a Gentile from Moab, takes place mostly in Israel. Esther’s story takes place in Persia, and she is a Jew whose ancestors were exiled from Jerusalem.

These two women—along with two men who care for them, Boaz and Mordecai, respectively—act wisely in God’s strength when called upon to face extraordinary challenges. Ruth and Boaz support a widow bereft of food and family security; Esther and Mordecai make a stand for their people threatened by genocide.

These small Bible books may not be familiar to you. To provide some background to these devotions, you might want to read each of them in their entirety. They read like short novels and can easily be read in a short time.

May these daily meditations help us reflect on living wisely as we serve the Lord in our own situations today.

*Arie C. Leder is professor of Old Testament, emeritus, Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan.*

## A GOOD PLACE TO DWELL

*Lord, you have been our dwelling place . . . Before the mountains were born . . . you are God.*  
—Psalm 90:1-2

Did yesterday seem “old” to you? Is today truly “new”? We know something of our past: our country of origin, family members, childhood experiences, illnesses, times of healing, sins, forgiveness. But knowledge of the future is beyond us. On this New Year’s Day we hope for the best, even newness—but we worry too: What will happen to us and our world in the coming year?

The good news is that beyond all the good and bad of our past, there is a steadying certainty: Before the mountains were formed (how long ago was that?), and even before the earth came into existence (before there was a tomorrow to think about), God has “been our dwelling place.” Note that the psalmist uses present tense verbs for God—“have been,” “are.” That’s because the ticking of a clock, the passing of

a day, and the changing of a year do not affect the Lord of heaven and earth.

For that very reason Jesus Christ, the Son of God, counsels his followers not to worry about tomorrow but to be concerned about being right with God today. As it is for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field for which God provides every day, let us rest in the assurance that every new day is God’s gift to us.

Do you think of each new day, month, and year as God’s gifts to you?

Everlasting God, “teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” Take my worries about tomorrow, Lord, and be my refuge all the days of my life. Amen.

**A LONG TIME AGO . . .**

*In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land.*

—Ruth 1:1

“In those days . . . everyone did as they saw fit” (Judges 21:25). During the time of the judges in Israel’s history, a famine ravaged the land. But God’s people had no right to complain, for they were only reaping what their unfaithfulness had sown.

Reaping an abundant harvest didn’t come naturally. God’s people knew that good crops and abundant harvests were in his hands. The Lord had taught that if they obeyed his commands, rains would come to water their fields, and abundant harvests would follow. The opposite was also true; disobedience to God’s commands would be punished. In the period of the judges, that happened often (see Judges 2). God’s people failed to listen to his voice. They forgot him and worshiped other gods, and the rains did not come.

Good soil, a wonderful gift from God, can provide abundant harvests. Careless management of good soil, however, and getting in the way of its God-given fertility—well, that’s foolish. Who would do such a thing?

James tells us that it’s not enough to hear the Word of God, we must do what it says (James 1:22-25). Not doing as the Word says is like a farmer doing all he can to destroy good soil, assuring a terrible harvest, and then complaining against God. That’s how it was in the time of the judges, in Ruth’s day, when “everyone did as they saw fit.”

Lord, may my heart be good soil, that your Word may be fruitful in my life and benefit my neighbor, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

## ... IN A FARAWAY PALACE

*King Xerxes . . . gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials.*

—Esther 1:2-3

Life in a Persian palace was difficult to imagine for ordinary people, especially when the king showed off his wealth and splendor and entertained nobles and officials with the best food and drink his kingdom could offer. Whether you lived in the suburbs of Susa or at the border of the empire, the palace was a faraway place. And what happened in the palace stayed in the palace—usually.

Like any grand king, Xerxes spoiled his guests. For 180 days he showed off the splendor of his kingdom, and then he gave a weeklong banquet—at which his guests could choose their own wine and drink as much as they pleased.

On the last day of the feast, Xerxes demanded that his queen, Vashti, parade her beauty before this besotted crowd. Her refusal and its conse-

quences did not stay in the palace; this would affect all who lived outside, even those who might have thought they lived beyond the king's reach.

“A king's wrath strikes terror like the roar of a lion” (Proverbs 20:2). Vashti lost her royal position, and the results would threaten even God's people.

But it is also true that a king's “favor is like dew on the grass” (Proverbs 19:12). As we will see in Esther's story, a young Jewish woman will win the king's favor, and she will use her position to save her people.

Let us seek the favor of God our King, that we may enjoy the bounty of his kingdom.

Thank you, Lord, that because of Jesus, we may enjoy your favor forever. Amen.

## O HUNGRY TOWN OF BETHLEHEM

*A man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. —Ruth 1:1*

In Bethlehem, which means “house of bread,” cupboards were bare. So, like Abraham, who left the promised land to escape a famine (Gen. 12:10-20), Elimelek moved his family to another land. They migrated to Moab. But before long, Elimelek died, and then his two sons, who had married, died also—leaving Naomi and her Moabite daughters-in-law with no support.

What would the God of Elimelek—whose name means “My God is King”—do about this grief and hunger? In the future, Bethlehem of Judah would provide Israel with a good and faithful king, David. But in the time of the judges, when everyone did what was right in their own eyes, there was no king in Judah.

Still, God’s people had the Lord as their King, who had been providing them with everything,

and he was faithful in blessing (Deuteronomy 28:1-14). But if Israel turned its back on him, God would also be faithful in punishment (Deuteronomy 28:15-24). That’s why Bethlehem was empty and Naomi was living far from home, now alone without a husband or sons to provide for her.

What would happen to Naomi? Who would help her? Remember the name of her husband: “My God is King”! In all things, God, who is faithful despite his people’s waywardness, “works for the good of those who love him” (see Romans 8:28).

By your Spirit, Lord, fill the hearts we have emptied by doing what is right in our own eyes. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

*Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai . . .*  
—Esther 2:5

You may be living far away from the place where you were born, but no matter where you go, your name and history go with you. Consider *Benjamin*, which means “son of my right hand.” Benjamin was Jacob’s youngest son, and he was protected by his brother Judah when they were questioned by Joseph in Egypt (Genesis 44). Benjamin, like his brothers, had many descendants, and among them was Israel’s first king, Saul, the son of Kish.

What does the name *Benjamin* have to do with Esther’s cousin Mordecai? We learn that Mordecai, of the tribe of Benjamin, is a “son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, who had been carried into exile . . . by Nebuchadnezzar” (Esther 2:5-6). This wouldn’t be the same Kish who was the father of Saul, but it probably meant

that Mordecai was a distant relative of Saul’s father. So, far from the home of his ancestors, a distant relative of Israel’s King Saul goes about his daily business. He’s unaware of what happened to Queen Vashti in Xerxes’ palace until his cousin Esther is swept up in the search for a new queen.

If you are a Christian, you bear the name of Christ—whether at home or far away. Named by Christ, we go about our daily business. And when events bring us before rulers and other powers, may we remember that we belong to Christ and bear his name.

Help me this day, Lord,  
to be firmly connected  
to Jesus Christ, who calls  
us to serve in his name.  
Amen.

## FAMINE AND DEATH

*Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. . . . Both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.* —Ruth 1:3, 5

The land was dead, and so was Naomi's family. Did Elimelek die because he left the promised land? Did Naomi's sons die because they married foreigners? Was Naomi suffering because of her family's actions?

Let's consider the bigger picture. Later in Israel, the Lord announced a great famine as punishment for the nation's wickedness, but among them were 7,000 people who had remained faithful (1 Kings 19:18). Proverbs 29:2 says that "when the righteous thrive, the people rejoice; when the wicked rule, the people groan."

Everyone, whether guilty or innocent, suffered the costs of disobedience in the days when the judges ruled. And in the world today, many innocents—Christians and many others—suffer from all kinds of deadly

diseases, natural disasters, selfish rulers, and terror attacks.

In times of great wickedness, when many innocents suffer what the wicked deserve, what can you do? Wise people know that "the eyes of the LORD are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good" (Proverbs 15:3). But how long can you wait for God to do something?

When Jesus cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34), he bore the judgment meant for the wicked. God answered his complaint, but not until he had died the death of the wicked, for you and for me.

Lord, help me to trust that you will make all things right one day. In Christ the Savior, Amen.

## FAR FROM HOME

*There was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai . . . .*  
—Esther 2:5-6

The Jewish people in the book of Esther had been far from their ancestral home in Jerusalem for a long time. The year was about 483 BC, and their great-grandparents had been exiled with King Jehoiachin over 100 years earlier (597 BC). Then, after Babylon was conquered by Persia in 539 BC, some Jewish exiles returned to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, but many had remained and were now scattered over Persia's 127 provinces. Still, they were God's people.

Jerusalem, the city of God's dwelling among his people, seems to have lost its central importance for many of the Jews in Persia. But this is not surprising. Even King Solomon, in his prayer of dedication for the temple, described it as God's earthly dwelling but recognized that it couldn't contain

God, who rules throughout the universe from his throne in heaven (1 Kings 8:27).

Remarkably, James 1:1 addresses Christians this way: "To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations." And today we know that the dwelling of the Holy Spirit is in the hearts and lives of God's people (Ephesians 2:19-22), no matter where they live on this earth. Like the Jews in Esther's time, Christians await the revealing of God's heavenly power. We wait for the heavenly Jerusalem to descend on the new earth. Then we will finally be home.

In the meantime, we live out our Christian citizenship among the nations, wherever we are.

Thank you, Lord, for the heavenly citizenship we have through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

## AND WHAT ABOUT GOD?

*The LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.*  
—Genesis 39:23

Readers of the books of Ruth and Esther sometimes ask, “Where is God in this story?” In Ruth the Lord is mentioned as doing something only twice (Ruth 1:6; 4:13), and God’s name does not appear at all in Esther. This has led some people to say that the book of Esther doesn’t belong in the Bible. But God was clearly at work behind the scenes in these people’s lives.

God was continually involved in Joseph’s life too. Far from home, Joseph lived as a faithful follower of the Lord. Though it may seem that Joseph made his own decisions, we read several times that “the LORD was with him” and “gave him success.” God also blessed the household of Potiphar because of Joseph. And when Joseph was framed and thrown into prison, God was still with him, giving him

“success in whatever he did.” Like Joseph, Ruth and Esther act in good and faithful ways because God is working in and through them. As they address the problems they face, they act with godly wisdom.

We believe that God’s eyes are on us (Proverbs 15:3) and that God’s will shapes our actions (Proverbs 21:30-31). Nevertheless, faith without wise action is useless (James 2:20).

As believers in whom God lives today by his Holy Spirit, we know it is wise to imitate the righteous and courageous behavior of Jesus Christ, whose resurrection from the dead we remember this and every Lord’s Day.

Bless us, heavenly Father,  
as we seek to do Christ’s  
will on earth. Amen.

## THE WORLD WE LIVE IN

*He sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom . . . that every man should be ruler over his own household.* —Esther 1:22

The advice of the king's counselors is ironic. The search process would bring Esther, a Jewish woman who shows great integrity, into the most important house of the empire. She would wisely influence the two most important men in the kingdom, intervening to protect God's people.

We like to believe that we're competent managers of our world, especially if we find ourselves in leadership positions. Xerxes had total confidence in his counselors' search for a new queen. They were surprisingly successful.

As the story develops, Esther impresses the king and becomes his favorite. But no one knows she is a Jew. As it turns out, following Mordecai's advice not to reveal her nationality at first is wise (Esther 2:10, 20). Eventually Esther's actions

and words would bring triumph for the Jews. Good Persian leadership brought this woman to the right place at the right time. Or was it God's intervention?

Laughable advice, corrupt search objectives, bad influence from inherited wealth, and threats against the faith are commonplace in our world. When we, as Christ's disciples, stand before rulers and leaders, let us be "as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16). That's good advice: "Whoever gives heed to instruction prospers, and blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD" (Proverbs 16:20).

Help us gain wisdom, Lord, that in this world we may speak and behave with integrity in every aspect of our lives. Amen.

**CALL ME BITTER!**

*"The Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty."* —Ruth 1:20-21

The women of Bethlehem can't believe this is Naomi. "You're right," she implies; "call me Bitter; Naomi is no more. And whom do I blame? The Almighty has done this. 'The LORD has afflicted me.'" Four times Naomi complains against God, as if to say, "When is God going to do something about my problems?"

Generations of oppressed Israelite fathers and mothers cried to the Lord in Egypt before he sent Moses to deliver them. How many children did Pharaoh drown? How could God allow that? Why didn't he do something sooner? (See Exodus 1-2.) How long do people have to wait?

It's ironic that even as Naomi charges God with emptying her life, the one in whom God is working to refill her is standing right beside her. But

Ruth remains silent. Later, with Naomi's permission, she will go out to gather food and marry Boaz. Ruth and Boaz will rescue Naomi by obedience to God's instructions in his Word.

When emptiness engulfs God's people, or when the stream of God's blessing in your life slows to a trickle for whatever reason, there's only one remedy: cry out to God for help.

God is with us today too, through the Word, Jesus Christ. He knows our fears and our difficulties, and he intercedes for us at the right hand of the Father Almighty.

Keep my eyes open, Lord, to your Word, that it may fill my empty heart to overflowing. Help me to trust in you always, for you are faithful. Amen.

## GOOD CITIZEN MORDECAI

*Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate . . . .*

—Esther 2:19

In the days of Ruth and Esther people went to the city gate for advice, for legal decisions, for wisdom. All the worthwhile news and gossip were available there also. Mordecai spent time sitting at the king's gate, and while he was there, he overheard plans to assassinate the king. Because he let the right people know about this plot, Mordecai saved the king's life. Good citizen Mordecai.

At this gate Mordecai also refused to kneel to Haman, the newly elevated, second most powerful official in Persia. Haman, we learn, was a descendant of Agag, an Amalekite king, and God had declared the Amalekites his enemy long ago because they had attacked his people when they were weak and vulnerable in the desert (Exodus 17:8-16; Deuteronomy 25:19). We also

know that Mordecai was from the same clan as Saul, Israel's first king. Mordecai refused to honor God's ancient enemy.

The apostle Peter teaches us to honor human authorities for the Lord's sake (1 Peter 2:13-17). Servants of the Lord who live by these instructions are good citizens. But Peter also warns against God's ancient enemy, the devil, who seeks to destroy us. Servants of God who resist the devil, along with others around the world who undergo suffering for Christ, are good citizens of the kingdom of God. And God promises that he will strengthen us and give us courage to face what lies ahead (1 Peter 5:8-10).

Strengthen me, Lord, to be a good citizen of heaven as I seek to live wisely here on earth. Amen.

## A RIGHTEOUS FOREIGNER

*She went out, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters.*  
—Ruth 2:3

Ruth's commitment to Naomi was both admirable and costly. She left her family home to live with Naomi in a strange land, even saying she would die there (Ruth 1:16-17). Joining herself to Naomi's future promised only a shared emptiness: no food and no family. What's more, her homeland, Moab, was a country often at odds with Israel. How could this "outsider" help Naomi? Well, Ruth began by gleaning grain that was left for the poor.

God's Word to Israel included an instruction to support the poor at harvest time: "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field. . . . Leave them for the poor and the foreigner" (Leviticus 19:9-10). Ruth began to fill Naomi's emptiness with the food God reserved for the poor. By be-

having like a righteous Israelite woman, this Moabite Gentile saved Naomi from starvation.

This was an example of the righteousness of true mercy, showing that you love God above all and your neighbor as yourself. Ruth's righteousness brought life-giving food to Naomi.

When Ruth explained where she'd gleaned the grain, Naomi rejoiced, for this gift had come from the field of a close relative, who would become her guardian-redeemer.

We too can praise God—for sending our Redeemer, Jesus Christ, as our Savior from sin!

Thank you, Lord, for the righteousness of Christ, which saves us from sin and fills all our needs. In his name, Amen.



## A RIGHTEOUS ISRAELITE

*"Pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don't rebuke her."*  
—Ruth 2:16

Righteous Israelites were scarce in the time of the judges, for people generally did as they pleased. What would the owner of the field where Ruth was gleaning be like? Would he be upright and honest, or would he take advantage of a poor foreign widow?

Boaz turns out to be righteous: he respects his workers and acknowledges Ruth's kindness in staying with Naomi and gleaning grain for her. Further, Boaz tells his workers to go beyond the letter of the law as stated in God's Word; he gives willingly from his abundance without being asked to help Ruth and Naomi. Boaz also encourages Ruth to glean until the harvesting is finished. Boaz does what is right in God's eyes.

Boaz and Ruth's righteousness proceeds from letting God's Word shape their lives.

Righteous living is the key to a life of blessing for God's people.

Jesus therefore tells his disciples to glean their "harvest" from among "the lost sheep of Israel" (Matthew 10:6), and Jesus himself brought his good news and healing to people outside Israel (Mark 7:24-37).

Today we, who are Gentiles like Ruth, are also temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19) and instruments of righteousness (Romans 6:13). May each of us also let God's Word shape our lives.

Wherever our eyes look and our feet take us, Lord, let us be righteous neighbors by the power of your Spirit. In Jesus, Amen.

## A TIME TO SPEAK OR BE SILENT?

*“Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”*  
—Esther 4:14

Esther faced a difficult choice. Was this a time to speak or not? She may have been reminded of the wisdom teaching about “a time for everything”: “a time to weep and a time to laugh . . . a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak” (see Ecclesiastes 3:1-8). How do you know when it is the right time to do one or the other?

It’s a question of understanding the time you live in, of recognizing signs of trouble in your community. Sometimes silence can be golden in a time of conflict, but at other times it can be very cowardly.

Mordecai discerned signs of a catastrophe, and Esther, being in the right place at this time, decided not to be silent. With fasting and prayer, she knew her life and times were in God’s hands. She would make use of

her position as the king’s favorite to invite him and Haman to a banquet, hoping she’d survive her unbidden entrance to the king’s court. Her lavish dinners would help her get close to the enemy. She would wait for the right time to say what needed to be said.

Esther exercised a patient, calculating wisdom to undo Haman’s plans—the kind of wisdom Christ exercised on the cross, where, though he gave up his life, he triumphed over and embarrassed all of God’s enemies (Colossians 2:15), saving us from the destruction of sin and death. What an amazing Savior!

Thank you, heavenly Father, that at the right time you sent Jesus to exercise the wisdom of the cross and save us. Amen.

## A TIME TO HONOR AND A TIME TO GRIEVE

*Afterward Mordecai returned to the king's gate. But Haman rushed home, with his head covered in grief.* —Esther 6:12

It is wise, the apostle Paul reminds us, not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. But people like Haman overrate their importance: *Whom would the king rather honor than me?* Fools invest only in “me.”

We are familiar with such folly: “My body is mine; I can do with it—intellectually, sexually, matrimonially, gastronomically—as I please. I am ruler over my body.”

What truly matters, though, is not what you think you deserve, or what you think of yourself, but what the King thinks of you. If we concern ourselves with the righteousness of the King, says Jesus, all the other good things we need will be given to us as well (Matthew 6:33).

Mordecai, a good citizen of the kingdom of heaven, had saved

the king of Persia from an attempt on his life. Because the smile of a king is like rain on a thirsty field (see Proverbs 16:15), King Xerxes honored Haman's enemy. Even worse, he ordered Haman to honor Mordecai in the exact way Haman had expected to be honored himself.

A fool and his honor soon come to grief.

May we act wisely, not thinking too highly of ourselves, and acknowledge that all our gifts and talents come from the Lord.

We thank you, God, for honoring your Son, Jesus, above all other powers by raising him from the dead. Glory be to you, Lord, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

## A TIME TO SPEAK

*Naomi said to her, "My daughter, I must find a home for you, where you will be well provided for."*  
—Ruth 3:1

Ruth's decision to leave Moab has made her a wanderer, with no place to call home. She has put her time into helping Naomi by doing the tiring work of gleaning in the harvest fields of Boaz, who happens to be a relative of Naomi's deceased husband. The time is ripe for Naomi to find a home for Ruth and put an end to her wandering.

Boaz is a guardian-redeemer, someone who can buy back Elimelek's fields and so return prosperity to the family of Elimelek. Earlier Boaz had shown a willingness to help by instructing his workers to leave behind extra grain stalks for Ruth. Naomi, banking on Boaz as an honest and caring person, hopes he will further fulfill his obligation as a member of the extended family. Because she is childless and has no other sons for Ruth to marry, Naomi

sees an opportunity in Boaz as her guardian-redeemer. Through this righteous Israelite, Ruth will not only find rest from her own wandering but also keep alive the name of her husband's family. Naomi speaks, and Ruth follows her instructions. And Boaz does what he is called to do.

When the time was right, God sent his only Son, who willingly became our Redeemer. He made this earth his home, suffered, and died for all who believe in him, so that we might be adopted into God's family and receive full rights as his children (Galatians 4:4-7).

Thank you, heavenly Father, for bringing us to our Redeemer to find our restful home in Christ. In his name we pray. Amen.

## MERCIFUL, NOBLE, OBEDIENT

*"May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge."*

—Ruth 2:12

Why should Ruth obey Naomi and make herself available to Boaz? Why not make her own choices? The answer is straightforward. When she refused to go back home, Ruth "clung" to Naomi (Ruth 1:14). The same verb in Hebrew is used elsewhere to describe a husband and wife being united together (see Genesis 2:25).

As in marriage, Ruth left her home willingly to join herself to another. In this case, she willingly shared Naomi's family situation, her God, her sorrow, her emptiness. Going to the threshing floor that night was a gesture requesting marriage—for the purpose of filling a part of Naomi's emptiness: her lack of a child and heir. When Ruth said to Boaz, "Spread . . . your garment over me," it meant, "Take me under your wing to be your wife, by the terms of

God's covenant for our related families."

In a way, this story is like Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Both stories teach God's people what it means to love their neighbor. When Jesus asked which traveler showed the love of God to the man who needed help, the response had to be "The one who had mercy on him."

Ruth went to the threshing floor because she was a merciful, noble person who wanted to honor God. Let us also honor God by being merciful and noble to our neighbors.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for not passing us by when we were in need of your love. Help us to respond with your love and care for our hurting neighbors. Amen.

## PERSIAN WISDOM

*“Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him—you will surely come to ruin!”*  
—Esther 6:13

Zeresh, like Vashti and Esther, is no push-over. She tells her husband Haman the truth: You pulled on the ears of the wrong dog! Haman’s advisers agreed. We don’t know how Zeresh and the others knew what Haman was up against, but we do know that God was working behind the scenes to protect his people.

There is much irony in these words from Zeresh. It’s as if they are spoken to God’s ancient enemy, Satan. But God’s ancient enemy, though he knows his end will come, will not stop wreaking havoc where he can. “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18).

God chose the weak and foolish things of the world to shame the wise and strong (1 Corinthians 1:27). Mordecai and Esther were only two dis-

tant relatives of old Jewish royalty trying to stand against the Persian elite. It was laughable.

But look further: the world today continues to mock a Jewish descendant of another royal family, Jesus Christ, the Son of David. And it wants to silence his followers’ testimony.

Yet only a fool would refuse to take this Persian wisdom to heart: “You cannot stand against him—you will surely come to ruin.”

God of heaven, comfort today your persecuted followers wherever they confront the folly of this world. And may those who do not experience persecution continue to lift them up and seek justice for all. Amen.

## COURTING THE KING'S FAVOR

*"If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life. . . . And spare my people." —Esther 7:3*

Haman, who enjoyed the king's favor as his most powerful official, was thrilled with the invitation to dine again with Queen Esther and the king. But in the past day he had also endured the shame of publicly honoring his enemy Mordecai, who had also found favor with the king (Esther 6). Soon Haman would have an even greater surprise.

This man who was plotting to destroy all the Jews in Persia had no idea that Queen Esther was also a Jew and a relative of Mordecai. What's more, if anyone had the king's favor, it was Esther, and she used her position shrewdly to advocate for her people. "If I and my people were only sold as slaves, I would not have disturbed you," she tells the king, in effect, "but this vile Haman wants to annihilate us." As the king's favor turns to rage against him, Haman knows

his only chance is to beg Esther for his life.

Xerxes' terrible power could snuff out Haman's life. As such, the king of Persia would be God's instrument against this enemy of the Jews.

Fearing a king's power is smart, even wise. But fearing the God who has power over body and soul is wiser (Matthew 10:28).

On the night before Jesus died for our sake, he broke bread and poured wine, saying, "This is my body . . . [and] my blood . . . for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:26-29). Come to the banquet that King Jesus has prepared for all who seek his favor.

For the favor you have given me, Lord, I thank you with body and soul. In Christ's name, Amen.

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF FOLLY

*Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was reclining.*

—Esther 7:8

As Haman begs the queen for his life, she is reclining on a couch. We know that Haman is pleading with her, but when the king returns, still fuming with anger, it looks to him as if Haman is now trying to molest the queen!

Esther does not try to correct that impression. She abandons Haman to the consequences of his folly, and he is soon impaled on the pole he has intended for Mordecai.

Fools are incorrigible: “A whip for the horse, a bridle for the donkey, and a rod for the backs of fools! . . . As a dog returns to its vomit, so fools repeat their folly” (Proverbs 26:3, 11).

Haman, the enemy of the Jews, was an intelligent man. He shrewdly arranged the affairs of state, even managing to get the king to decree death for

all the Jews—because he hated one Jew in particular: Mordecai. Haman was smart, but he was also a fool—and fools seldom know when to stop.

Fools confide in their management skills; they’ve got all bases covered and keep friends in the right places. They behave as if “there is no God” (Psalm 14:1). They forget that “the LORD works out everything to its proper end, even the wicked for a day of disaster” (Proverbs 16:4).

As we interact with people each day—whether they are family members, neighbors, co-workers, or others, let us always seek to act wisely.

Thank you, Lord, for the wisdom of Christ that has overcome the foolishness of the world. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



## REDEMPTION

*“As surely as the LORD lives, I will do it.”*

—Ruth 3:13

The word *redeem* means “to buy back.” For Boaz this meant using his money to buy back a relative’s land, and having a child with Ruth to preserve the family name of that relative.

Like Ruth, Boaz is a person of noble character. As Ruth clung to Naomi out of respect for her mother-in-law and for the Lord, Boaz clung to the Word of God, recognizing that all honor and praise belong to the Lord. Like one who meditates on the Word of God, he was “like a tree planted by streams of water” (Psalm 1:3). Well-rooted and -watered, that tree would not wither. From what we have seen of Boaz, we note that his words and deeds are so well-rooted and -watered that by the time Ruth speaks to him at the threshing floor, he will become the redeemer Naomi and Ruth need.

Boaz could have passed up this opportunity, for there was another redeemer. But he didn’t. He went out of his way to make his intentions clear with a vow: “As surely as the LORD lives, I will do it.” Someone who loves the Word of God does not make a vow lightly (Deuteronomy 23:21-23).

The God of heaven and earth promised to send us “one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens” (Hebrews 7:26)—Jesus Christ, the Word of God himself. And God has kept his promise. Through Jesus we are redeemed from the debt of sin, if we believe in him as our Savior. Do you?

For the costly price of our redemption through Christ’s sacrifice, we thank you, Lord. Amen.

**BREAD IN BETHLEHEM**

*“Don’t go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.”*

—Ruth 3:17

Naomi and her family had left Bethlehem because of a famine, and she returned years later at the beginning of a harvest. Through Ruth, God had begun to alleviate Naomi’s food problems with regular visits to Boaz’s fields, but Naomi was still bereft of her husband and sons. Who would fill that emptiness?

When Ruth returned from the threshing floor, she poured out six measures of barley, telling Naomi that Boaz had said, “Don’t go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.” Naomi was ecstatic, because she recognized that with this food Boaz had put a down payment on her family’s future.

“Silver or gold I do not have,” said the apostle Peter. “But what I do have I give you.” And in Jesus’ name he told a lame man to walk, and the man was able to walk—and to jump and to

praise God too (Acts 3:6-10). In a similar way, Naomi was given renewed life. Ruth would bear a son. Naomi would have a family to take care of her—and through that family Israel would receive a king who would bring an end to the emptiness of the time of the judges.

We too have received a down payment: “You were marked in [Christ] with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory” (Ephesians 1:13-14).

Help us, Lord, to live faithfully by your Spirit’s guidance as we look forward to the time when our redemption will be complete. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

## THE KING'S WISDOM

*"No document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked."*  
—Esther 8:8

Haman was dead, and now Mordecai wore the king's signet ring and managed Haman's estate. But Mordecai, Esther, and the Jewish people still faced the destruction Haman had planned, for all the provinces had received the decree to annihilate the Jews. And a royal decree could not be revoked. What were they to do?

Xerxes now exercised his power shrewdly: although the order to destroy the Jews had to remain, the Jews would now have the right to defend themselves. Mordecai, bearer of the king's signet ring, signed the decree.

Now the people of the empire had to decide. Many became Jews, "because fear of the Jews had seized them." Which would be better, to be a living member of the Jewish people or a dead Gentile?

God had told Adam in the Garden: "You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die" (Genesis 2:17). That decree could not be revoked either. All who have sinned will die. But God provided a way out: "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).

That is our choice: fear God and believe in his Son, Jesus Christ, or oppose him and lose our life. Which do you choose?

Heavenly King, thank you for your eternal wisdom to grant life to all who believe in Jesus Christ. Help me to follow you and to choose life today. Amen.

## NO PLUNDER IN PERSIA

*But they did not lay their hands on the plunder.*

—Esther 9:10, 15, 16

One of war's tragic consequences in times past was that the victors plundered their enemies. This enriched some generals and the war industry; it also helped to pay soldiers, provide food and drink, and build weapons of war. Most of all, however, despoiling the enemy bled their economy dry and reduced their community to servitude.

But the Jews in Persia did not plunder the enemies who tried to destroy them. No one could stand against the Jews, in part because fear of Mordecai moved many government administrators to help them. The Jews' main goal was relief from their enemies, not plunder.

Our battle is not against flesh and blood but against the forces of evil in the spiritual realms. Christians take up the armor that God has decreed for them,

as described in Ephesians 6:10-18. Christians are also urged to let God's Word judge "the thoughts and attitudes of the heart," for that Word is "alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow" (Hebrews 4:12).

May God bring into his kingdom the people from all nations whom he favors through Jesus Christ. Then they too will celebrate "relief from their enemies."

We praise you, O God, and we look forward to the time when every knee will bow before you and every tongue will confess that you are Lord. Amen.

## BOAZ AT THE GATE

*“Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelek, Kilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite . . . as my wife . . . .”* —Ruth 4:9-10

Like the good Samaritan in Jesus’ parable, Boaz goes out of his way to help. At Bethlehem’s gate, where legal decisions are made, Boaz lets the closer relative know of Naomi’s situation. The man is ready to do what is right. But when Boaz points out that Ruth is part of the package, the closer relative steps back; he does not want to endanger his own estate. He knows that if Ruth has only one son by him, then that son, as his only heir, will inherit his property, but another family name will be on the deed.

Boaz doesn’t bat an eye. The elders and people at the gate witness Boaz’s costly kindness. This good Israelite will keep his oath, even when it hurts: he will father a child for Mahlon in order to secure his property and name. Thus Boaz risks his own property and name. What gen-

erous humility; what a citizen of the kingdom of God!

The good Israelite Jesus, born in Bethlehem, did not consider equality with God something to hold on to. So outside Jerusalem, in the presence of all the people and elders, he humbled himself and paid the highest price to fill the emptiness of all who yearn for a Redeemer. “Therefore God . . . gave him the name that is above every name . . . to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-11).

Father God, may we confidently entrust our name and all our property to Jesus Christ, in whose name we have all that we need forever. Amen.

## RUTH AND HER SISTERS

*He settles the childless woman in her home as a happy mother of children.*  
—Psalm 113:9

Near the end of the story of Ruth we read that she is considered a sister to other women: to the barren Rachel, who for many years couldn't give Jacob children; to Rachel's sister Leah, who gave Jacob several sons (Genesis 29-31); and to Tamar, who pursued Judah to have a child for Judah's son Er (Gen. 38) and bore twins, Perez and Zerah. We see again how important the family line was to the Jews of that time.

The people at the gate compare Ruth to these women—and evoke the memory of others who came before them—Sarah, Rebekah, Samson's mother, and Hannah—who, either physically barren or socially unable to have a family, had children who became building blocks of the house of Israel.

God's people in Christ do not build their own "house" in the

normal way. Even socially unapproved people participate in building the church of Christ. Thus we find the prostitutes Tamar and Rahab; the Moabite Ruth; Bathsheba, whom David abused; and Mary, who became pregnant by the Holy Spirit, in the genealogy of Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:1-17, 20). These unusual mothers bore the descendants God promised to Abraham, and they were all ancestors of Jesus Christ.

"Who is like the LORD our God," who lifts up the poor and needy and brings them into his house? Who brings to life sons and daughters through his Holy Spirit? "Praise the name of the LORD"!

Through Christ, Lord, bring all your children out of barrenness so that your house may be full. Amen.

## JOYFUL RELIEF FROM THE ENEMY

*These days of Purim should never fail to be celebrated by the Jews—nor should the memory of these days die out among their descendants.*

—Esther 9:28

The Jews had escaped Haman's plot of destruction. Haman himself had fallen into the hole he had dug for others, and many of his followers were destroyed on the day decreed for the Jews' annihilation. So the days afterward were celebrated as days of relief from the enemy.

This was not to be just a one-time celebration, however, for the memory of Purim was to continue through the generations. Feasting, joy, gifts of food to one another, and gifts to the poor would mark these days every year. And so it is to this very day among observant Jews.

Christians too observe a time each year when they remember the day the devil plotted Christ's destruction, and with great joy they celebrate the day of Christ's victory over God's ancient enemy. And by Christ's command they gather regularly

at the Lord's table to remember his gifts of his body and blood, offered so that all who believe in him may live. Week by week and year by year, then, Christians are reminded to be joyful because death no longer has any power.

The Lord's Supper, Good Friday, and Easter are celebrations of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. And already today Christians begin to enjoy their eternal rest from the enemy as they await the final return of the Lord Jesus.

We praise you, O God, for giving us relief and rest from our enemy. May we faithfully honor you and share this good news everywhere. Amen.

## JOYFUL AND WATCHFUL

*As for me, I watch in hope for the LORD, I wait for God my Savior;  
my God will hear me.* —Micah 7:7

Although it's been centuries since Haman was defeated in Persia, others have tried to destroy the Jews since then. The holocaust of World War II is a painfully recent example. Centuries have also passed since Jesus' victory over sin and death, but the ancient enemy has not failed to keep persecuting his followers.

How can God's people sustain their joy and feasting in the face of endless attacks? What can they do when evil seems so strong?

First, remember that God's ancient enemy has been decisively, though not yet fully, defeated. Like a dog, furious at being chained, he lunges at anyone within reach from the end of a long chain (Revelation 20:1-3). Second, like Mordecai and Esther, let us recognize contemporary forms of persecution and destruction. What is

happening to Christians in the Middle East today? In many countries believers still face death for their faith.

Whereas the world trusts in its own ability to solve problems, God's people rest in the truth that only Christ's coming again will provide the real solution. In the meantime, like Mordecai and Esther, let us be good citizens of the country where we live, but let us hope only in the Lord of heaven and earth.

As we joyfully look forward to the day of Christ's ultimate victory over the ancient enemy, let us continue to work and pray.

Come quickly, Lord Jesus, and bring us into the fullness of your rest. But while we wait, may we work for your kingdom. In your name, Amen.



## NAOMI HAS A SON!

*The women living there said: "Naomi has a son!"*

—Ruth 4:17

Isn't it strange? Ruth was pregnant and gave birth, but the women exclaimed that Naomi had a son. Actually, this is the point of the story: not only did Ruth fill Naomi's emptiness with enough food, but she also provided a son to replace the ones Naomi lost.

Isn't it strange that although Ruth did all of this, the women praised God and responded in the way they did to Naomi? Actually, that's another point of the story. Although he is seldom mentioned, God gets credit for bringing food back to Bethlehem. And in a departure from the normal way of reporting conception, God is reported as making it happen: "The LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son."

Of course, Ruth and Boaz themselves had a hand in restoring Naomi's well-being; it

could not have happened without them. Even so, a few well-placed phrases remind God's people that there are no fields of ripened grain and no children without the Lord's blessing. God blesses the fruit of our labor and the fruit of the womb.

Years later, Jesus, a descendant of this family, was born in Bethlehem with heaven's blessing. Through the story of Ruth we can see that Christ's birth is part of a family history that depends on God's abundant blessings. In God's world it is normal for him to fill the empty and redeem what was lost.

"Praise be to the LORD!"  
On this Lord's Day we are grateful to know that our Redeemer lives. Lord Jesus, live in our hearts today. Amen.

## EXALTED REDEEMERS

*“He will guard the feet of his faithful servants, but the wicked will be silenced in the place of darkness. It is not by strength that one prevails.”*

—1 Samuel 2:9

Impossibly, a mere Jew who had sat daily at the king’s gate became second in command of all Persia. Unexpectedly, a lowly shepherd boy named David became king of God’s people, second in rank only to the Lord. Both made wise decisions when called to act. Neither sought to become redeemers and rescuers of Israel.

Seeking greatness is unbecomingly—foolish, actually—especially for God’s people. Getting greatness by manipulation is something Haman would do, but Mordecai served and trusted God, who gave him honor as well as great responsibility, in which he served faithfully. Contrary to the ways of the world, an honest sense of unworthiness and a will to serve others rather than ourselves appear to be requirements for

good and faithful servants of the great King.

The apostle Paul exhorts his readers, “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment (Romans 12:3). James encourages his readers to look into the mirror of God’s law (James 1:23-25). Doing that, we will see reflected the image of Christ, who, though exalted, became like one of us and was humbled to the burden of the cross.

“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom” (James 3:13).

Give me the wisdom, Lord, to be considerate, submissive, and filled with mercy. Amen.

**SAME OLD, SAME OLD?**

*Praise the LORD, my soul . . . who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*

—Psalm 103:1, 5

We've reached the last day of the first month of this new year. It's possible that, for many of us, this year may already be "the same old thing" as years before—with promises of new beginnings dashed, resolutions faltered, and hopes receded.

But newness does not come with a new year; nor does it age by the last day of an old year. Satisfying and refreshing newness is ours every day through the Lord Jesus Christ, who makes all things new. Days and years will pass, but the Word of the Lord is forever.

Once settled in Bethlehem, Ruth did not look for anything new or exciting; she was embraced by the kindness and integrity of Boaz, and she immersed herself in living out her days with her family and with God. The ancient, living Word of God kept her young

and refreshed till the day she died. After Haman's death and Mordecai's promotion to the king's right hand, Esther too was done with the anxiety and evil of Haman's persecution. It was good to rest in the victory gained by discerning God's timing and will in her life.

Wisdom invites us to eat what refreshes and keeps us ever new; folly winks at stolen sweetness, which only embitters and binds us to perpetual old age. Take, eat, and drink from the wisdom of God, and be ever new!

We praise you, O God!  
Your grace is limitless, and you provide every good thing for us. Thank you for your love. In Jesus, Amen.

# february

## The Greatest Stories Ever Told

**Arthur J. Schoonveld**

The New Testament gospel books are the source of some of the greatest stories ever told by the greatest teacher who ever lived, the Lord Jesus. In some of his stories, which are often called parables, we'll likely recognize ourselves. And in all of them we'll hear Jesus speak to us. More important, through the stories that Jesus tells, we'll catch glimpses of God our Father. We'll see how he reveals himself as a waiting Father who welcomes us back even when we've run away, a merciful Father who forgives, a listening Father who hears our prayers, and a loving Father who accepts us just as we are when we come to him. We'll also come to know him as the Father who invites us to become his coworkers in building his kingdom here on earth.

As you read and reflect on Jesus' parables, it is our prayer that you'll hear the Lord speak to you and see yourself as God sees you. But most of all we pray that as you hear him speak, you'll not just be hearers but also become doers of God's Word.

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## HOW ARE YOU LISTENING?

*“Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”*

—Luke 8:9

When I was growing up, our family often discussed the sermon after a Sunday worship service. One of our parents usually asked a question like “What did you think of the pastor’s message?” The same question is still asked in many homes today. This is important because we gather for worship to hear what the Lord has to say to us.

Now, here’s an equally important question: “How were the listeners this morning—did they listen well?” According to the Lord Jesus, listening is crucially important: “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.” Or, as Jesus says after telling another parable, “Consider carefully how you listen” (Luke 8:18).

Listening to God’s Word is a tremendous privilege, but it’s also a great responsibility. And someday you and I as hearers of God’s Word will have to give

account for how we have listened and what we have done with what we have heard.

Listening can be difficult. After preaching for almost 50 years, I am discovering that listening is often more difficult than teaching or preaching. Again and again I find myself critiquing and even criticizing what I have heard instead of asking, “What did I hear the Lord say to me? How will it affect my life? What am I going to do about what I have heard?” That’s what really matters. In the words of the apostle James, we must become doers of God’s Word as well as hearers (James 1:22).

Holy Spirit, teach us how to listen, and help us to become doers of your Word. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

## WHAT KEEPS US FROM HEARING?

*“The seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.”*

—Luke 8:15

A good farmer was mindful to spread seed on good soil, or it would never take root and grow into a crop. Some of it could be trampled on or eaten by birds; some could fall on rocky soil or among thorns and then wither or get choked out. Only the seed sown on good soil would produce a fine crop.

The same is true of the Word of God. God spreads his Word generously, even in unlikely places. Just as some seed never brings a crop, so also God's Word sometimes bears no fruit. Some of us attend worship services but don't really hear what God is saying—perhaps because we think we've heard it all before, or because we have been pressured to be there.

What will it take for us to remove obstacles that keep us from hearing what God has to say to us? In years past some of

God's people took the time on Saturdays to prepare for worship on Sundays. Every Saturday evening, for example, my wife's parents took a half hour to have devotions in preparation for the Sunday service.

One easy thing we can do today is to pray before gathering with others to worship God. We can pray for the worship leaders and the person who will be preaching, and we can ask that God's Spirit will speak through them. We can also ask God to open our hearts and minds so that we can hear what the Spirit wants us to hear.

Holy Spirit, please remove obstacles that can so easily keep us from hearing what you are saying to us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

## WHY ARE WE HERE?

*"Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"*  
—Matthew 25:23

Several years ago two young women wrote a book, *The Unique Challenges of Life in Your Twenties*. According to their story, they were disappointed with the way life was turning out for them. Instead of finding fulfillment after college, they found themselves disillusioned. In their own way they began asking, *Why are we here?* They were experiencing what they called "the quarterlife crisis."

Whether it's because of a quarterlife crisis, a midlife crisis, or a retirement crisis, the same question is asked by millions of people: *Why am I here?* or *What is the purpose of my life?*

Jesus' parable about the bags of gold (or talents—measures weighing about 75 lbs. each) helps to answer that question. Each of us is created for a purpose, regardless of whether we believe or don't believe in God.

And to fulfill our purpose, the Lord has entrusted us with gifts and resources, to be used to serve him and to build his kingdom here on earth.

Each of us in our own way and in our own setting has been placed on the earth to love God and to love our neighbors. It's up to us to use the gifts and resources we have been given to begin serving our Lord in our everyday lives.

When we use the gifts we've been given, we will someday hear him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

Father, thank you for entrusting us with your gifts. Encourage us to use them in your service and in the service of others. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## HIDING OUR GIFTS

*“Take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance.”*

—Matthew 25:28-29

The man with one bag of gold felt cheated, thinking his master was unfair. While one of the servants was given ten bags, and another five, he had received just one. As far as he was concerned, it wasn't even worth using. What could he accomplish with such a small amount?

Perhaps that's how you feel. Maybe your classmate gets straight A's and is one of the most popular people you know, while you're just average. Maybe your colleague gets promoted even though you have worked twice as hard. Maybe the church down the street is growing while yours keeps losing members. Some people seem to have it all, and you feel that you're just limping along. You conclude that you have nothing to offer.

If that's how you feel, please read this parable again. Regardless

of who we are, there's not one person on earth who has nothing to offer. When all is said and done, it's not about how many resources or abilities we have received; what matters is how we use what we have been given. Don't compare yourself to someone else. Take a good look at yourself, discover the gifts you have, and begin using them. And when you do, you'll no longer feel cheated. You'll find fulfillment in life, and you too will hear the Lord say, "Well done. . . . Come and share your master's happiness!"

Lord our God, keep us from comparing ourselves to other people, and give us the grace to use whatever gifts you have given us. In Jesus, Amen.



## ONE SINGLE SEED

*"The kingdom of God . . . is like a mustard seed. . . . It grew and became a tree."*  
—Luke 13:18-19

Each year the Cable News Network (CNN) selects ten individuals who have made a big difference in the lives of other people. Out of those ten CNN Heroes, the network chooses one person who in their opinion has made the greatest impact. In 2015, the person chosen was a 21-year-old woman who, after graduating from college, decided to live in Nepal. She started a home for young girls who had been abandoned and abused and had no place to go. Seeing the faces of those young girls was a living testimony to what one person can accomplish.

Watching that story made me think of the parable of the mustard seed. According to the Lord Jesus, God's kingdom here on earth is like a mustard seed, which starts out very small and can grow into a tree.

Sometimes our efforts seem so small and insignificant. What good is one prison visit, and what can an occasional Bible study at a rescue mission possibly accomplish? What good is one card or email sent to someone who's hurting? What good is that small church compared to that megachurch down the street?

Reread today's parable and be assured that the Lord Jesus can turn even our smallest efforts into something great for his kingdom! As someone put it, "Of course you can't do everything, but you can do something!"

Father in heaven, help us to see that you will use even our smallest efforts to build your kingdom. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

## WHEN CANDLES WON'T LIGHT

*"No one lights a lamp and hides it in a clay jar or puts it under a bed. Instead, they put it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light."*

—Luke 8:16

In his book *God Came Near*, Max Lucado tells a story about four candles that didn't want to leave their storage closet during a power outage. When the owner went to find them and light them so that he could see in the dark, the candles began to talk. They did not want to leave.

One candle said he needed more preparation. Another one was too busy. Another said she was not qualified. The last one said that giving light was not her gift.

Of course that was just a story. Candles don't talk. But that story reflects some of our attitudes when it comes to letting our light shine out to others, so that people see God working in our lives and give him praise, as Jesus taught.

We too have our excuses. Some of us feel we need more training before we can tell others about Jesus. Some of us look at our own lives and feel we don't have the right to talk about the Lord because of our own failures. Others of us simply concentrate on doing other things.

The Lord is quick to set us straight. We are the light of the world, he said, just as he is the light. We need to let go of our excuses and simply let our light shine. Ask yourself today, "How and where can I let my light shine?"

Father in heaven, give us the grace and willingness to be what you have intended us to be so that we will let our light shine for Jesus. In his name, Amen.

## THE LOST DRONE

*“There is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”*  
—Luke 15:10

A little more than a year ago one of our grandsons got a mini-drone for his birthday. It was without question his favorite gift, and he had to try it out at once—never mind the snow. It soared into the sky, flew over a clump of tall trees, and disappeared from view. He ran to find it, but it was gone!

Of course, he was upset! Six of us bundled up, traipsed through the snow, and searched without much hope of finding it. Amazingly his mom found the drone half-buried in the snow. We were all elated!

That minor incident made me think of the woman who lost one of her ten silver coins. Even though she had nine coins left, she turned her house upside down to find the one she had lost, and when she found it, she called her friends and neighbors to celebrate with her. Finding

something important to you is a reason to rejoice.

Of course, today's parables are not only about a lost sheep or a lost coin but are meant to show how much it hurts our Lord when even one of his children wanders away and gets lost. The religious leaders were upset because Jesus ate with “sinners.” But the reason he came was to call everyone to repentance and salvation, for we are all sinners in need of grace and new life.

Two questions: Have we repented, and do we go out of our way to help bring others to Jesus?

Help us, Lord, to do whatever we can to help others come back to you. In your name we pray. Amen.

## THE RUNAWAY SON

*“The younger son . . . set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.”*  
—Luke 15:13

Sometimes it's really hard to take. You're living at home. You have to follow all the rules, and whenever you go out, you have to tell your parents where you are going. You're expected to go to church, listening to sermons and singing hymns that sound really boring to you. Your parents even want to know what you are watching on your smartphone or tablet. Sometimes you just want out!

That's how the younger son in Jesus' parable felt. Every day it was the same routine and the same rules. He could not wait to get away. So one day he went to his father and demanded his inheritance. The father did not argue but gave him the money and let him go. For the first time in his life the younger son felt free, only to discover that the freedom he craved would turn him into a slave.

Of course this story is not just about a rebellious teenager or a runaway son. It's an illustration of anyone who has turned their back on the Lord and wants to go their own way, regardless of the consequences. A twenty-something relative told me recently that his generation did not need God because they were doing just fine without him.

If you find yourself in a “distant country,” away from God, come back to him, because he's waiting! And, if you have already come back to God, pray for all who are trying to live without the Lord, that they may turn to him too.

Father in heaven, help us to see how much we need you, and if we have drifted away, please bring us back. In Jesus, Amen.

## THE STRANGER AT HOME

*“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. . . . He answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.’”* —Luke 15:28-29

The older brother was upset! Of course he was. Ever since he was young, he had worked on his father’s farm, without ever asking for any kind of recognition. But when his good-for-nothing brother came home penniless after squandering his inheritance, his father not only welcomed him with open arms but even put on a banquet to celebrate. It was too much.

No matter how much the father pleaded with him, the older son refused to join the celebration. Like the Pharisees who served God out of a sense of duty, the older son had served his father—not out of devotion but because he felt he had to. The Pharisees had complained that Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them (Luke 15:2). Similarly, the older son griped about his father’s welcome of his decadent younger brother.

The response of the older son forces us to look at ourselves. Do we serve the Lord with gladness? Do we come to worship because we love the Lord, or out of a sense of duty? Do we give cheerfully or because it is expected of us? Are we willing, like God the Father, to forgive people in our lives who have hurt us? Do we understand that we are as much in need of forgiveness as the younger son, even though we may not have left for a distant country?

Lord, our God, help us to search our hearts, to serve you with gladness, and to truly rejoice when a sinner comes back to you—because of Jesus. Amen.

## THE WAITING FATHER

*“This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”*  
—Luke 15:24

In his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Henri J. M. Nouwen explains that the parable of the lost son sums up the story of salvation. The father in the parable is a picture of our heavenly Father, “who watches and waits for his children, runs out to meet them, embraces them, pleads with them, and urges them to come home.” The parable, Nouwen says, expresses “the boundlessness of God’s compassionate love.”

Where do you see yourself in this story? Are you like the wandering younger son, or the self-righteous older son? Or both? The parable is indeed the story of God’s amazing love as he welcomes us back, no matter where we have been or what we have done.

If at this moment you find yourself far away from God, he is waiting for you. If, like the

younger son, you have turned away from the Lord, he invites you to come back. If you have become enslaved to some sin, he is urging you to confess and receive his forgiveness.

Or if, like the older son, your heart has not been right with God and, like the Pharisees, you have worshiped God with your lips while your heart was far from him and hard toward the undeserving, he invites you too to come back and celebrate with him.

Your Father is waiting for you!

Thank you, loving Father, for your love, patience, and compassion for each one of us, no matter who we are or what we have done. Thank you for always taking us back. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

## PASSING BY ON THE OTHER SIDE

*“A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite . . .”*

—Luke 10:31-32

A Facebook post told the story of a pastor who on his first Sunday at a large church decided to come dressed as a homeless person. Before the service began, he walked around, mumbling a greeting. Only three people bothered to greet him in return. When he asked for money to buy breakfast, people hurried past him. After all, you don't give money to a panhandler. Besides, who knew why he was homeless? He might have been an addict who had ruined his life with drugs or alcohol. The church members “passed by on the other side.”

That's what the priest and Levite in Jesus' parable did. Perhaps in a hurry to serve in worship, or tired and needing to get home, the priest and Levite looked the other way. The robbed and beaten man was not their prob-

lem, and stopping to help could be dangerous.

Of course the real danger is in passing by without helping. It's much easier to look the other way. For seven years I regularly drove past a homeless shelter without ever bothering to stop and ask how I or our congregation could help. I thought I was too busy to bother.

If you, like me, have passed by on the other side, ask for forgiveness, and ask the Lord to give you a second chance. Then look for opportunities to serve.

Lord Jesus, thank you for reaching out to us when we were down and out. Fill us with your compassion and help us to reach out and help others. In your name, Amen.

## THE GOOD SAMARITAN

*"But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him."* —Luke 10:33

The Samaritan who stopped to help the robbed and beaten man had every reason to look the other way and pass by on the other side. The victim was a Jew, and Jews and Samaritans did not associate with each other. Any self-respecting Jew would rather walk several extra miles than risk running into a Samaritan. And Samaritans felt the same way.

In spite of that, the Samaritan reached out to help the Jew. He bandaged his wounds, put him on his own donkey, and took him to an inn. He even offered to pay for additional expenses the innkeeper might incur. He was willing to interrupt his schedule and use his own resources to help someone in need.

Why would this man stop and help when two religious leaders refused to do anything at

all? What is it that drives many people today to lend a helping hand, open their homes, reach into their wallets, or interrupt their schedules to help someone in need? The answer is that they have *compassion*.

In this parable, among other things, we are being called to live with the kind of compassion God has shown us in Jesus. He came to help and restore us when we were down and out, even though we were his enemies (see Romans 5:10).

Do you follow Christ's example and show compassion to others?

Lord Jesus, keep us from judging anyone who is down and out. Help us to show others the compassion you have shown to us. We pray in your name. Amen.



## WHOSE NEIGHBOR AM I?

*The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."  
Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."* —Luke 10:37

The teacher of the law who came to test Jesus was in for a surprise. Instead of engaging in a theological discussion about inheriting eternal life, the Lord asked a simple question, "What is written in the Law?" Without hesitation the legal expert answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" Jesus then said, "You have answered correctly. . . . Do this and you will live."

It's that simple. But for some reason the teacher of the law wasn't satisfied. So he asked, "And who is my neighbor?"

It's a question worth asking. Are we to love all the people in our lives? Do I really have to love the unlovable people in my life? Do I have to love that disrespectful student in my

class or that obnoxious person I work with? And do I have to love people who have made a mess of their lives?

In this parable the Lord points out that the real question is not "Who is my neighbor?" It's really "Whose neighbor am I?" Am I willing to be a neighbor to whomever the Lord places on my path, and do I practice it by showing compassion and mercy?

That is a question we all need to answer. How do you answer it?

Lord our God, open our eyes and help us to know whose neighbors we are to be, and give us the grace to reach out in mercy and love. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

## ADVICE FOR INVESTORS

*“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”* —Luke 12:15

The rich man had it all! He had built a successful business and had made all the right investments. And with this year's abundance in profits, he decided it was time to reap the benefits of his hard work. He said to himself, “You have plenty . . . laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.”

It seems to make a lot of sense. When you've worked hard all your life and planned out your finances carefully, you should be able to look forward to a carefree retirement. You'd think the rich man in Jesus' parable would have been commended for his wise planning.

Instead, God calls him a fool. But that's not because he was rich or because he had planned for his retirement. It's because he had missed the most important thing in life. He had not been rich toward God. In all his care-

ful planning and hard work he had left God out of the picture. He had stored up treasures on earth without storing treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19-21). And when his life came to an end, he stood before the Lord empty-handed.

That, says Jesus, is what will happen to anyone who lives without paying attention to the Lord and his kingdom. Today's parable leaves each of us with some important questions: How am I living my life? Am I being rich toward God? Am I investing in his kingdom?

Lord God, help us to take a good look at our lives, and give us the wisdom to invest in your kingdom. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## INSIDE OUR MANSIONS

*“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day.”*  
—Luke 16:19

When I came back from a mission trip to India, I was sure I would never forget what I had seen. The unimaginable poverty, the plight of “untouchables,” the sight of two women clawing through garbage just outside our hotel, the tug of a young girl refusing to let go until I gave her something—these images filled my mind.

But I did forget. Before long my appetite returned, and the mental images of what I had seen slowly disappeared. Surrounded by every luxury imaginable, I again began to develop calluses that kept me from feeling compassion for people in need.

Most of us do not have the luxuries described in today’s parable. Few of us dress in purple or fine linen. Compared to the mansion of the rich man, most of our homes are mod-

est. Some of us may even have trouble making ends meet. And yet, compared to millions, many of us do live in luxury. Two billion people live on less than two dollars a day. More than a billion don’t have clean water to drink, while hundreds of millions are chronically hungry. And every four seconds a child under age 5 dies because of extreme poverty. That’s the reality of the world we live in.

It’s up to us who live in luxury to have compassion for people who need help. It’s up to us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, provide water—however we can.

Lord, keep us from developing calluses that dull our hearts from feeling the pain of others. Fill us with your love. Amen.

## LYING AT THE GATE

*“At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table.”*

—Luke 16:20-21

In 1873, at the age of 33, a Roman Catholic priest named Damien came to a small Hawaiian island. According to the story, the island had become a place where the local government sent its lepers. Like Lazarus, they were forced to live “outside the gate.” In imitation of the Lord Jesus, Father Damien went to live with the lepers and identified with them. Sixteen years later he himself died of leprosy.

Most of us will probably never be asked to minister to lepers in the way Father Damien did. But it does not take a visit to a leper colony or a mission trip to an impoverished country to find people like Lazarus.

In the news we see refugees fleeing for their lives. We meet people in need when we visit a homeless shelter. We meet others in need when we encounter

people who are looked down on because they don’t fit in or because they are not considered to be productive members of our society.

It’s up to us who have been blessed with plenty to reach out to people who are lying at our gate. We are to pray for them, support the different agencies that minister to them, and volunteer if we are able.

Ask the Lord today and every day to show you ways to reach out to people who need help.

Lord God, open our eyes so that we can see the people who are lying at our gate, and move us to help. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.

## WHAT IF . . . ?

*“If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”*

—Luke 16:31

*What if . . . ?* This question came to mind while I was thinking about the rich man’s plea to send Lazarus to warn his brothers. What if someone came back from the dead—would people pay attention?

What if someone like Mother Teresa came back from the dead to tell millions of viewers on TV and the Internet that there is life after death, that it matters how we treat the poor here on earth, and that someday we’ll have to give account of what we did for them? Would that lead people to obey God and make changes in their lives?

The rich man in Jesus’ parable seemed to think so. He asked Abraham to send someone back to earth to warn his brothers. In the response from Abraham, however, Jesus set the record straight: if people refuse to listen to God’s Word,

they won’t be convinced of its truth even if someone returned from the dead to tell them.

Jesus knew the stubbornness of people’s hearts. Today we have not only “Moses and the Prophets” but also the New Testament, which makes clear that Jesus himself rose from the dead so that we can have eternal life with him. But not everyone believes they need a Savior. It takes the Spirit of God, working in our hearts, to convince us. So Christ calls us to live by God’s Word, share it with others, and ask God’s Spirit to reveal the truth to them also (see John 16:7-15).

Lord, thank you for your Word and for salvation in Jesus. By your Spirit, help us to share your love and truth everywhere. Amen.

## PERSISTING IN PRAYER

*“Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night?”*

—Luke 18:6-7

Huck Finn, the main character in one of Mark Twain’s novels, became convinced that praying was a waste of time. For three days straight he prayed for fish hooks, but no fish hooks appeared! His conclusion: “There ain’t nothing in it.”

I’m sure many of us have felt that way at times. So many of our prayers seem to go unanswered. You pray for healing, but the person you love is taken from you. You ask for a job, and nothing happens. You ask the Lord to heal a broken relationship, and still your marriage ends in divorce. You plead with the Lord to bring your son or daughter back, but it doesn’t happen. Even the well-known Christian author C. S. Lewis began to wonder if praying was a waste of time. During his wife’s illness he pleaded with God to spare her life. And when she

was gone, he said, it seemed the “door to heaven” was “double-bolted”—but he realized later that God hadn’t shut him out.

In the parable of the persistent widow Jesus tells his disciples—and us—to “always pray and not give up.” If even an unjust judge finally listens, how much more will our Father in heaven hear us! Though God does not always answer our prayers the way we want him to, he always listens and cares, and someday he will right all wrongs.

Holy Spirit, teach us how to pray, and help us to believe that our Father in heaven hears and answers every prayer. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

## WHAT'S OUR PRAYER ATTITUDE?

*“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.”*  
—Luke 18:10

In this parable Jesus describes two very different prayer attitudes.

At the temple, where he went to pray, the Pharisee felt right at home. This was where he belonged, of course, and anyone listening to his prayer would be duly impressed, right?

But the Pharisee did not come to pray to God; he came to talk about himself. He did not come to thank God for his grace, mercy, and forgiveness; he came to declare how glad he was that he was not like other people. He followed all the prescribed religious duties and always gave a tenth of what he made. Compared to others, the Pharisee seemed nearly perfect. God had to be pleased with him, right? Certainly he was much better than that tax collector standing “at a distance.”

But Jesus quickly set the record straight. The Pharisee went home just as he had come, unrepentant and full of himself. But the tax collector went home forgiven and justified.

What matters to the Lord is not how good we think we are, how much we give, or how often we go to church. What matters is our prayer attitude—that we realize our need for God’s grace, mercy, and forgiveness. Only then will we be justified.

Before you approach God in worship today, or before you spend time with the Lord at home, ask yourself, “What is my attitude before the Lord?”

Holy Spirit, help us to see ourselves as you see us, and help us to see our need for your grace. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.

## MERCY FOR ME, A SINNER

*"The tax collector . . . beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'"*  
—Luke 18:13

Sometimes people who come to faith in Christ as adults are reluctant to join a church, because they feel that everyone else there has got their act together and is virtually perfect.

The truth, though, is that every one of us is often like the tax collector in Jesus' parable—a sinner in need of God's forgiveness and grace. That's why Psalm 51 rings so true in our hearts and minds. It also helps us remember that even the great King David of Israel, who wrote this psalm, was no better than any of us—even though he was called "a man after [God's] own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14; 16:1-13).

If we already belong to a church, we must also be careful not to act like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable, looking down our noses at others whom we think of as sinners—for we have

all "sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:9).

Anyone who comes to the Lord, confessing their sins and recognizing Jesus as the only Savior, is justified by God. And the church of Christ is not a place where people have it all together; it's simply a community of sinners saved by grace.

Have you experienced God's mercy? If so, go and share that good news with others so that they can experience it too!

Lord, thank you for the assurance that we are saved by your grace. Thank you for accepting us as we are, and for forgiving us in Jesus' name. Amen.



## WHEN TIME RUNS OUT

*“Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.”*  
—Luke 16:2

Someday each of us will stand before the Lord to give an account of how we have lived. Whether this happens at our death or when Christ returns, he will call us to explain what we have done with the resources he has entrusted to us.

Every nation will be asked what it has done with the gifts it has received. Someday the United States and Canada, two prosperous countries, among many others, will be asked what they have done with their tremendous wealth. Have they shared their wealth with less privileged nations? Have they opened their borders to the millions of refugees fleeing for their lives? Have they been concerned about justice not only for their own citizens, but also for those living in nations where there is much injustice?

The church will someday be called to give an account of how it has used its resources. Have we understood that we are blessed to be a blessing? As we pour millions of dollars into deluxe buildings for our own use and comfort, do we ask ourselves what we should be doing for churches in underdeveloped countries?

Someday families and individuals will have to give an account as well. Have we taken the time to reach out to those who are less privileged?

Are you doing your part to build God's kingdom here on earth, while there is still time?

Help us, O Lord, to take a good look at our lives, and show us how to arrange our priorities. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## ECHOES OF GOD'S FORGIVENESS

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

The story in this parable seems almost impossible to imagine. Why would anyone who has just been forgiven a million-dollar debt refuse to forgive a debt of a few dollars? It doesn't make sense.

Consider, though, how hard it can be for us to forgive others. How long have we held a grudge against someone, even for a simple mistake? Or how about refusing to forgive someone for saying something that hurt you—perhaps so long ago that you can't remember what they said? Or maybe the offense was more serious. Perhaps a spouse betrayed you, a co-worker lied and got you fired, a parent abused you, or a bully made life miserable for you.

Only the grace of God makes it possible to forgive people who sin against us. Only when we begin to realize how much God

has forgiven us in Christ can we learn to forgive.

A Facebook post told the story of a basketball coach, Monty Williams, whose wife was killed by an erratic driver, leaving him a single parent with four children. At the memorial service he urged the people there to pray for the driver and talked to them about the importance of forgiveness. He understood the words of the apostle Paul, that we are to forgive each other just as in Christ God has forgiven us.

As Christians, we are called to be echoes of God's forgiveness. Are you living that way?

Father, thank you for forgiving us each day. Teach us how to forgive, because of Jesus. Amen.

## CALLED TO SERVE

*"So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'"*  
—Luke 17:10

Some time ago a volunteer at a nonprofit organization gave us a tour through the building where he works five days a week. At one point someone in our group asked him what motivated him to volunteer. He answered, "I was diagnosed with cancer, and now that I am in remission I want to use whatever time I have left doing something worthwhile."

He is one of thousands of volunteers in many organizations who use their time, talents, and resources to join in building God's kingdom here on earth. They don't ask for recognition or remuneration. They do it out of gratitude. If asked, they might well answer by saying, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty." To them, to volunteer, go on a mission trip, or get involved in

their community is the natural thing to do.

Of course, not everyone is able to volunteer. Many of us have fulltime jobs and busy families. Some of us are confined to our homes, unable to get involved. But we can pray for and encourage people who volunteer, and we can support them financially if we are able. And for those of us who have never considered volunteering, perhaps now is a good time to reconsider and do what the Lord invites us to do.

Lord Jesus, thank you for all who volunteer and who aren't concerned about getting credit for it. Help each one of us to look for opportunities to take part in building your kingdom. Amen.

## IS GOD UNFAIR?

*“Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”*

—Matthew 20:15-16

Several years ago a member of our church was privileged to lead a young woman to faith in Christ. The young woman had a terminal illness, and shortly before she died, I stood with a few others in her hospital room, listening to her testimony. At her memorial service I mentioned how in her last few months she had turned her life over to the Lord. After the service someone told me that it just seemed too simple.

Like the workers in the vineyard, that person felt it was too easy and not fair. In the parable, the men who had worked hard all day were upset because those who had been hired in the last hour received the same wages as they did. They felt cheated. The person who came to talk to me felt the same way. It did not seem quite right that someone who turns to the Lord

during the last few months of her life should be as acceptable to God as someone who has served the Lord for a lifetime.

Jesus’ message in this parable is that in the kingdom of heaven it’s not a matter of how hard we’ve worked or how long we’ve served the Lord. We don’t earn our way into the kingdom; eternal life is a gift of God’s grace, and he extends his grace to everyone who comes to him, no matter when.

Have you experienced that grace in your life?

Thank you, Lord, for your amazing grace, which you extend to all who call on you in Jesus’ name. Amen.

**YOU ARE INVITED! RSVP**

*“Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full.”*  
—Luke 14:23

In today's story a man invites guests to a celebration banquet, but all who are invited turn him down. They make excuses about having other commitments, but, as Jesus' listeners would know, the excuses are all lies. For example, in those days, no one would buy oxen without trying them out first. And if a social friend had just been married, the host would have known and would not have interrupted him with an invitation to another party. The host refuses to give up, however, and sends his servants to invite others whom most people would not expect to be invited.

The parable of the great banquet is a warning that God's people must not take him for granted (see Luke 14:1-14). If they ignore his invitations to full life and faithful living, or if they expect no others will be invited,

they will be in for a surprise. God “wants all people to be saved” (1 Timothy 2:4), but if his guests refuse and insist on going their own way, they will not “eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.”

Sadly, God's invitations are still turned down by people who have known about him all their lives. Many even who have grown up in Christian homes turn away, thinking they are doing just fine without God.

The Lord still invites us to come to him by believing in Jesus. He wants us to accept his invitation, and when we do, he sends us out to invite others, whoever they are, to come.

Lord, thank you for inviting us to celebrate with you. May we also faithfully invite others who do not know you. Amen.

**KEEP WATCH!**

*"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."  
—Matthew 25:13*

A while back I was painfully reminded of Jesus' urging to keep watch. While I was driving to a meeting, someone speeding along from the other direction ran a red light and crashed into my car, totaling it and giving me my first ride ever in an ambulance. Thankfully I was not seriously injured, and I was released from the hospital after only four hours.

This made me think about how our life here on earth can end in a split second. As James puts it, our lives are like "a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (James 4:14). And we don't know the day or the hour when the Lord will return or when our life on earth will end.

Unlike the five wise virgins in Jesus' parable, the five foolish virgins did not feel the need to be prepared. They discov-

ered too late that they would need to go and get extra oil for their lamps, and when they came back to the banquet hall, the groom had arrived and the door was shut. No matter how much they pleaded, the answer was "I don't know you."

The day will come when each of us will have to leave this life. Someday we too will meet the bridegroom, the Lord Jesus. Then all that will matter is whether we have been prepared by believing in him and by serving him here on earth. And if we are prepared, like the five wise virgins, we too will be able to go in with him to the wedding banquet.

Lord Jesus, help us to be prepared when you call us home or when you return. In your name, Amen.

## THE LEAST OF THESE

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

We saw him in the city of Chicago near the place where we were staying. His name was John, and he was homeless. His only means of transportation was a wheelchair. No matter how often he was invited to come inside or urged to stay at a shelter, he refused. The only thing he did accept was some change and some leftover food. Some people would label him a loser.

In today’s parable the Lord Jesus uses a different name to describe millions of people like John. He calls them “the least of these.” The unborn child; the person who is mentally or physically challenged; people who are homeless, or hungry, or refugees; people in prison; people who might never be able to live productive lives—all are among “the least of these.” And Jesus does not mean these are lesser people, as if they

were not as important as others. He adds that whatever we do for someone in need, we do it for him. As Mother Teresa of Calcutta put it, “When we look into the face of one of them, we see the face of Jesus.”

It’s not up to us to judge people like John, who was homeless—or anyone else who may face challenges or be at a disadvantage. Our task is simply to reach out and show Jesus’ love. Ask the Lord today to open your eyes to see his face in the faces of people who are down and out, disadvantaged, or challenged in other ways. And pray for a willingness to reach out.

Lord, help us to realize that whatever we do for people in need, we are doing it for you. Amen.

## A FRIEND AT MIDNIGHT

*"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."*  
—Luke 11:9

One evening, shortly after midnight, a teenage woman was standing on our doorstep, ringing the doorbell. She was desperate. She was newly married, expecting a child, and now her husband threatened to leave her. She did not know where to turn, so she came to us. She needed a friend at midnight.

Many of us, at one time or another, need a friend to talk to or lean on. Sometimes life gets the best of us, and in our need we turn to someone we can trust, and we hope that somehow we'll find some relief.

But sometimes friends let us down. Sometimes the people we turn to don't understand—or, worse, don't really care. Sometimes we misread the people we confide in—and they betray our trust. And some friends, like the one in the par-

able, help only because they can't get out of helping.

But there is one Friend who never lets us down: the Lord Jesus. He is the Friend who's always there, who never puts us on hold, and who never turns us away. And even though he doesn't always give us what we want, or what we think we need, there is one gift he always gives: the Holy Spirit.

Jesus says, "If you then . . . know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" He is the one Friend we can't do without.

Father in heaven, fill us with your Holy Spirit so that we can honor and serve you. For Jesus' sake, Amen.



## NOTES

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