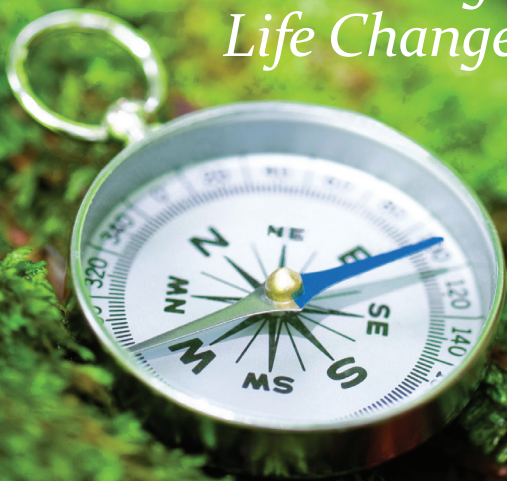


Today

July/Aug 2016

refresh, refocus, renew

*Embracing
Life Changes*



ALSO: STAND IN GOD'S STRENGTH

Friends:

I love my GPS. At first, it just gave me a better way to navigate than trying to look at a paper map in one hand while driving with the other. But beyond giving directions, my GPS helps me know what to expect and how to plan for the future. Even if I know exactly where I'm going, it tells me how long it will take and what time I'll get there. It tells me about traffic ahead and suggests better routes. Some apps can also locate gas stations and restaurants along the way. As a glorified compass, a GPS can be a guide to get you through your journey well.



More powerful than any device, however, Scripture is God's guide for us on our journey. It tells us where we are, where we are headed, and how to live. It tells us in whom to place our trust as we travel through life and what to expect along the way.

In July, Pastor Jimmy Lin explores how Scripture prepares us for changes in life. Some changes are surprises; some are long-planned. God's never-changing Word guides us through ever-changing circumstances.

And in August, Pastor John Kuperus encourages us to be courageous on our life's pilgrimage. God's Spirit equips us with shield, sword, and guidance to navigate the path of life and avoid pitfalls. Scripture is a lamp to our feet!

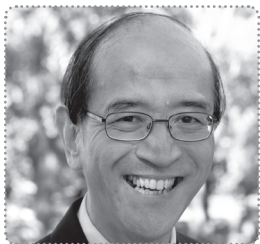
May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

—Steven Koster

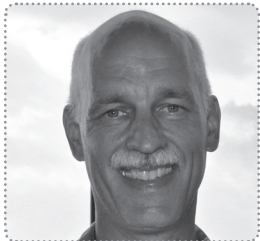
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“Embracing Life Changes”
Jimmy Lin



“Stand in God’s Strength”
John Kuperus

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ReFrame
Media

Embracing Life Changes

Jimmy Lin

july

Warren Wiersbe, a pastor and writer, once said (echoing Isaiah 40:8), “The world changes—circumstances change, we change—but God’s Word never changes.” As we mature in life, both physically and spiritually, these words resonate more and more each day. In our devotions for July, as we navigate together through the ups and downs, the laughter and tears of life, let us remember, “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path” (Psalm 119:105).

Rev. Jimmy Lin served as the Chinese ministry leader of Back to God Ministries International from 1990 until his retirement in 2015. His wife, Doris, is one of the translators of Today into the Chinese language, which now has a readership of over 300,000. The Lins live in Tinley Park, Illinois. They have two sons and four grandchildren.

Stand in God’s Strength

John Kuperus

august

In Ephesians 6 the apostle Paul urges us to “be strong in the Lord” and to “put on the full armor of God” (vv. 10-11). The apostle warns, “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil” (v. 12). In August we will meditate on these verses and many others in Scripture that remind us that the only way to overcome the destruction of our sin and the work of the devil is through the power of Christ.

John Kuperus is married to Helen, and together they have seven children. John has served as a pastor in a local church and as a missionary with Youth with a Mission in Kona, Hawaii. Presently they reside in Sussex, New Jersey, where John serves the Lord in business and as an elder in his church.

A TIME FOR EVERYTHING

“God will bring into judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time to judge every deed.”
—Ecclesiastes 3:17

I recently retired after serving for 25 years at Back to God Ministries International, and my wife, Doris, retired around the same time after working in special education for over 20 years. As you might imagine, retirement has brought many changes to our lives—emotional, social, financial. And especially our daily routines have changed.

In today’s passage, the writer of Ecclesiastes says, “There is a time for everything”—and that surely includes working and retiring. Earlier in the book, the writer reflects on his life situation and on life’s many changes. As he ponders, the writer concludes that there is “nothing new under the sun”: “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again” (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

As I made plans for retirement, I also reflected that I have faced significant changes throughout my life. But they were not always so big or so many as the ones I have encountered in retirement.

Still, as I continue to reflect on the Bible’s wisdom about life changes, I hope to be able to be called a “good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21) at the time when God will bring us all into judgment.

Come, would you like to join me on this journey and listen for what the Lord may have to say to you as well?

Heavenly Father, give me the ears to listen and the eyes to see what you are teaching me each day. In Christ’s name, Amen.

DO WE NOT KNOW? HAVE WE NOT HEARD?

Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. —Isaiah 40:28

People of all ages are fascinated by magicians. A recent winner of the popular *America's Got Talent* competition (with a prize of one million American dollars) was a magician. How can magicians pull a live pigeon out of an empty hat? How can they find countless sections of a scarf in an empty pocket?

Of course, we know magicians are illusionists and that no human being can produce something out of nothing. Only God can do that. God created time, and at the beginning of time "God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1) and everything in it. Then "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (Genesis 1:31).

Creation brought about major changes: from no time to time, from nothing to everything, from no life to life. If we are amazed by "magic" or illusions,

how much more are we amazed by the miracles of creation? And even more by the fact that God created you and me!

No wonder King David exclaimed, as he thought about God's creation, "What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" (Psalm 8:4).

Isaiah asks, "Do you not know? Have you not heard?"

Shall we not also praise and thank God for the wonders of creation?

Creator and loving God, thank you for all the miracles of your creation. Help us to acknowledge our dependence on you as your creatures and to give thanks for all your provisions each day. In Christ's name, Amen.

EYES OPENED

Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

—Psalm 139:16

Have you ever had the wonderful experience of being present when a baby was born? Maybe you were there for the birth of your child, a grandchild, or another family member. You watched those little eyes light up or, more likely, struggle to stay open as they adjusted to bright lights. The baby saw the real world for the first time, a dramatic change from the view inside the womb.

Researchers say that a baby's eye sockets begin to form in the fifth week of pregnancy, but the eyelids will not open until the seventh month. Even after birth, the eyes and their relationship to the brain continue to develop. Our Creator God definitely knows us as individuals before we are born. Life is a continuous process of growth and development in God's care, even in the womb. He knows

us and loves us even before our parents realize we're there. That's how much God pays attention, even to you and me. As God told the prophet Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart" (Jeremiah 1:5).

As our eyes continue to open up to the world around us, we will not only gain knowledge of the created world but also of its Creator. We will then be able to live our days according to the way ordained for us, written in God's book.

Gracious Lord, thank you that we are "fearfully and wonderfully made." Open our eyes to see you and know you as our Lord and Savior. Amen.

USING OUR WORDS

Teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.
—Colossians 3:16

Babies cry soon after birth, showing that their lungs are working. As babies grow, they continue to cry when they are hungry, uncomfortable, or have other unmet needs. Eventually most children learn that they can express themselves with words. So some of the first words they learn are “I want!” and “Mine!” Later, to encourage them to explain what they are feeling, parents will also say, “Use your words.”

Our self-centeredness does not diminish with age; it intensifies, though perhaps more subtly. We become shrewder as we scheme to get what we want. For Jacob, this grasping for more started when he was born. As he grew, he learned to deceive others, and he told more and more lies to get what he wanted.

We see in ourselves and in others around us the same craving for more. More things, more power, more fame—the list goes on. When and where will it end? St. Augustine learned this truth: “You have made us for yourself [Lord], and our hearts are restless till they find rest in you” (*Confessions*).

God has given us the great gift of language and speaking. Let’s use our mouths not for self-gratification but in singing and voicing our gratitude to our Savior and Lord. And let’s use our words to share the good news of Jesus to our family and neighbors whenever we can.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for giving us the ability to speak. May we use it not for our own gain but for your glory. Amen.

MISCOMMUNICATION

"We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!"
—Acts 2:11

If you are a non-native English speaker like me, you faced a difficult challenge when you moved to an English-speaking country. Even though I've lived in the United States for many years, I am still always conscious of whether people understand what I am saying. Maybe you have the same experience. You don't want any miscommunication or missed communication.

The people at Babel would not have had that problem at first, since "the whole world had one language." But good communication needs more than just a common language; it needs the desire to communicate.

God confused the language of the people at Babel because they wanted to glorify themselves and be independent of God. However, even if the Lord had not confused their language, they still would have

scattered and been unable to live in harmony because of their sin (see Genesis 6:5). True communication can occur only when "the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility" that exists between people is broken down in the name of Jesus (Ephesians 2:14).

On Pentecost, fifty days after Jesus' victory over our sin, people heard Jesus' followers communicating the good news in their own native languages. What a miracle, reversing the curse of Babel and pointing to the day when every tongue will confess "that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Philippians 2:11)!

Thank you, Jesus, for your victory over our sin. Help us to communicate with one another for the good of your kingdom. Amen.

GROWTH SPURTS

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.
—Ephesians 4:15

Researchers say parents in America spend an average of sixty dollars per month on baby clothing. That is a lot of money. If your child is going through a growth spurt, it can seem like the money is going down the drain fast. On the other hand, would you rather have your child stop growing?

It can be hard, especially for parents, to watch a child struggling to grow and develop properly. It's even more difficult, however, for our heavenly Father to watch us faltering spiritually. Paul grieved that the Corinthian believers weren't maturing spiritually: "I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready" (1 Corinthians 3:2). Some of the signs of spiritual immaturity are jealousy and quarreling (1 Corinthians 3:3), being tossed around by false

teaching (Ephesians 4:14), and failing to distinguish good from evil (Hebrews 5:14).

Committing your life to Christ may take just a moment, but spiritual growth is a lifelong process that takes place in cycles. As Peter puts it, we need faith, and then we grow in goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, mutual affection, and love. As time goes on, believers grow toward maturity in each of these qualities.

Do you have that desire to grow?

Father, help us to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. To God be the glory, now and forever. In Jesus, Amen.

THE INSTITUTION OF MARRIAGE

“God ‘made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”

—Mark 10:6-8

July 7 on the Chinese lunar calendar is called the Qixi (“seventh evening”) Festival. Also known as the Chinese Valentine’s Day, this festival goes back for thousands of years. The main focus is on the love story between an earthly cow herder and a fairy weaver girl. So on this day, single girls would go to temples to ask for the blessings of a good husband and a lasting marriage.

If we are serious about having a good marriage, we should consult the Lord, who created marriage. In today’s passage, Jesus quotes from the book of Genesis, showing that God instituted marriage. God made the man (male) and the woman (female), and God joined them together in marriage. If we deviate from this foundation of marriage as God instituted it, then we go our own way toward

destruction, no matter what promises, arrangements, skills, or determination we might try to use to find fulfillment in life.

If, on the other hand, a couple marries on the basis of this foundation and seeks the Lord’s will faithfully, their marriage will have added protection. Ecclesiastes 4:12 tells us, “Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” Indeed, a husband and wife who together seek the Lord form a winning combination.

Thank you, Jesus, for reminding us that God instituted marriage when he created man and woman. Help us to remain faithful to this sacred communion. Amen.

BIG OR SMALL

“Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”

—Isaiah 1:18

Little Mary came crying to her mother: “Johnny splashed mud on my white dress again!” Mom scolded the little brother, saying, “Johnny, why did you do that?” He argued, “Mom, it’s only a few tiny spots this time; it’s not a big deal.” Mom said, “Whether it has a few spots or a big stain, Mary’s white dress is changed completely. It’s not white anymore.”

Often we are like Johnny; we try to trivialize our wrongdoing. We even project our thinking onto God. James wrote about showing favoritism to certain people while ignoring or putting down others. It’s easy to think that favoritism is no big deal and that many other sins are more serious or offensive to God. But James pointed out that even one sin makes us guilty. I once heard this memorable saying from an old preacher: “No sin

is too heavy for Christ to bear, and no sin is too light for Christ to spare.” Committing one sin is already too many!

How then can we be saved? Is there any hope? Yes! Our salvation is secured by the sacrificial death of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 John 2:1-2). He shed his blood to pay the price for all of our sins, whether they are big or small in our human eyes.

Have you experienced that salvation and forgiveness that come only through Christ?

Thank you, Jesus, for paying the debt of all our sins. Help us to live lives worthy of your sacrifice. In your name we pray. Amen.

LETTING GO

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

—1 Peter 5:7

In the final scene of the movie *Forrest Gump*, Forrest Junior has started going to school, and Forrest has waited at the bus stop all day for him to come back. We may say that Forrest did that because he had an IQ of only 75, but in real life, many parents feel the same way when they send their children away for their first day of school.

Going to school for the first time is a big event for young children. They have to transition to spending a lot of their day interacting with strangers—teachers and other students. That makes for a big change not only in the children's lives but also in their parents' lives, especially for a parent who has been at home with their child every day for the past several years. It is not easy to let your child go.

In our Scripture reading for today, the writer of Hebrews

talks about what Abraham and Sarah had to let go. They let go of their home, extended family, and community when God called them to leave and travel to the land he would show them (see Genesis 12). Abraham was also willing to let go of his son Isaac, the promised son born to him and Sarah in their old age (Genesis 22:1-12).

They did all this “by faith”—and faith is a learning process. Just as parents get used to letting go as their children begin to grow up in life, so we too learn to let go of things in our lives as we trust God to guide us day by day.

“Through the storm,
through the night, lead me
on to the light; take my
hand, precious Lord; lead
me home.” Amen.

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

“As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

—Joshua 24:15

Sending children to school is only the beginning of the letting-go process for parents. Children become more and more independent as they learn to make choices for themselves. In the process of growing up, they have to make decisions about friends, dating, majors in college education, careers, marriage, and so on.

As believers, we know that we *should* seek God’s will in every aspect of life, but that does not mean we always do so. Nowadays, with so many voices on the Internet and elsewhere eager to give advice on every little topic, it is easy to see God as only one of the experts available to us. We’re tempted to ask for God’s blessing on choices we have already made, rather than asking for God’s guidance in our decision-making in the first place.

When the Israelites came to the prophet Jeremiah to ask for the Lord’s guidance, they promised that “whether it is favorable or unfavorable, we will obey the LORD our God.” But when Jeremiah told them what the Lord wanted them to do, they refused. Their minds had already been made up. They trusted more in another power (Egypt) for protection than in the power of almighty God.

What a contrast from Joshua, who had made up his mind to serve only God! Whom will you choose to serve at every turn?

Lord Jesus, help us to trust in you so that we can “test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:2). Amen.

LOOKING BEYOND

“The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

—Luke 19:10

Can you imagine a person graduating *cum laude* from college with a teaching certificate but being turned down from a teaching job 24 times? That’s what happened to Brad Cohen, a man with Tourette syndrome, a neurological disorder resulting in involuntary repetitive movements and barking sounds. He was eventually hired at the 25th school where administrators looked beyond the disability and saw Brad’s gifts as a teacher. Brad eventually became a very successful teacher and a motivational speaker. His autobiography became a bestseller and was made into a heartwarming movie called *Front of the Class*.

Jesus paid special attention to people who were overlooked. Jesus noticed short Zacchaeus up in the sycamore-fig tree and reached out to him. On another occasion, though his

disciples rebuked a blind man who had called out to Jesus, the Lord called him out and restored his sight (Mark 10:46-52). At another time, Jesus also healed a woman who had been bleeding, and he made sure her faith was recognized (Matthew 9:20-22).

Christian love demands that we see beyond the superficial, that we make special accommodations for people who need them, and that we value the contributions of everyone. Jesus put it quite simply: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39).

Lord Jesus, teach us to see all people as you see them—fellow creatures worthy to be redeemed and transformed through your gift of life for us. In your name, Amen.

A NEW MASTER

Now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.

—Romans 6:22

Government reports about inmate releases can be discouraging. The percentage of released inmates who go back to prison for committing crimes again is as high as 60 percent in some states. This situation is often the result of poor government support after release, abandonment by family and friends, isolation and rejection from the community, and so on. Some inmates even lament that life is easier inside the prison walls. They struggle with their newfound freedom and instead go back to old ways.

In our Bible reading for today, Jesus talks about a person set free from an evil spirit. However, since the person did not have anything to fill up the void left in his heart, the evil spirit came back later with seven more spirits to fully exploit the person's life. If some-

one's life has been ruled by sin, they have to be changed internally, in their heart. Any external help will not have a lasting effect.

Many of us have never been in trouble with the law, not to mention serving time in prison. But we have all been imprisoned by our sin, and we are not free until Christ saves us (Ephesians 2:1-5). When that happens, the Lord himself comes to live in our heart. We have a new Master, the One who loves us—and our old sinful nature cannot come back to control our life anymore!

Lord Jesus, thank you for freeing us from our slavery to sin and giving us new life. Help us to live fully for you, the way you created us to live. In your name we pray. Amen.

LIFT UP THE CROSS

"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."
—John 12:32

A few years ago, local authorities in a big coastal Chinese town asked churches to take down the crosses from the tops of their church buildings. This led to confrontations between the local government and Christians, and eventually one of the most beautiful churches was destroyed by bulldozers. Hundreds of crosses were also forcibly removed across town.

I visited the area right after the height of the confrontation. The whole scene looked so different. Without their crosses, the churches no longer looked like churches.

Local Christians said that, apart from being sad about what had happened, it was a wake-up call. In the past they had spent a lot of resources building magnificent churches but largely ignoring outreach and community needs.

Now they realize that a building is not the most important part of a church's ministry.

Jesus said we need to lift up the cross so that people will know him. This is not mainly about setting up a cross on a building. It means, first and foremost, living out the message of the cross in our lives.

Jesus says to us, "You are the light of the world. . . . Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:14-16).

"This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine, let it shine, let it shine, let it shine." Father, help us to shine the light of your love each and every day. In Christ, Amen.

EXCUSES

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

I came across a list of the most popular excuses drivers make when they are caught speeding. Here are some examples: “I didn’t do anything dangerous”; “My wife seems to be having a baby”; “Everybody is doing it”; “I thought I was still driving in Canada” (where the speed limit is posted in kilometers per hour, not miles per hour). Some of these excuses may seem believable, while others sound as if the offender isn’t even trying to give a good reason. A note accompanying the list says that none of the excuses will work because the police have heard them many times before. The best thing to do, it says, is just to admit you are speeding, and sometimes you can catch a break.

We make excuses because we do not want to take on responsibilities or face consequences.

Similarly, afraid of punishment, Adam blamed Eve, and Eve blamed the serpent after they disobeyed God’s command. By doing so, their relationship with God changed completely. The formerly close relationship of walking with God changed into one of hiding and deceiving (Isaiah 59:2).

Whether dealing with God or with people, the best and only way to live is to come clean and not hide behind excuses, no matter how carefully crafted they are. Excuses don’t fool anyone. Have you asked God for forgiveness today?

“Just as I am, thou wilt receive, wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve; because thy promise I believe, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.” In Jesus’ name, Amen.

BE STRONG AND COURAGEOUS

“Be strong and courageous. . . . for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”
—Joshua 1:9

Not long ago I had an operation to have my gall bladder removed. Now, the Chinese word for gall bladder is *dan*, which also means “courage.” So after a gall bladder is removed, Chinese people often tease the patient about not having courage anymore.

With today’s health hazards, natural disasters, threats of war, and terrorism, it does take some courage to wake up and face a new day—with or without a gall bladder! Sometimes we face difficult situations that look so daunting we wish they were just bad dreams.

Joshua faced huge challenges and changes. He had just become the commander of the fickle Israelites. Joshua was to lead them into the promised land, not knowing what obstacles and dangers awaited. The Lord promised Joshua only one

thing—that he would be with Joshua all the time. But there was one condition: the Lord would be with Joshua only if he obeyed the law of God and did “not turn from it to the right or to the left.”

What is testing your courage today?

Don’t be afraid. God was with Joshua at the Jordan; he was with Daniel’s friends in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3); and he promises us, “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” as we “go and make disciples . . . teaching them to obey” God’s commands for full living (Matthew 28:19-20).

Thank you, Jesus, for your promise that you will abide in us, guiding us to abide in you. Amen.

HANGING IN THERE

We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.
—Romans 5:3-4

Our wedding anniversary is in July. My wife and I have been married for nearly forty years, but we have a long way to go if we want to catch up with Eddie and Jessie Macon of Stockton, California, who just celebrated their 70th wedding anniversary. Eddie was the first African American player of the Chicago Bears, my city's football team.

Unlike many celebrities, Eddie and Jessie have remained together through a host of changes. They survived the Great Depression, racial segregation, the loss of a child, and physical ailments. When asked about their secret to a long-lasting marriage, Eddie said, "It is because of the bad times, not despite them, that we have stayed together for so long."

Nowadays people are too eager to give up in the face of changes or hardships. People give up on

their education, career, marriage, and friends all too easily when things do not go their way. Sadly, people treat spiritual matters similarly. People leave their church over a minor disagreement. Others give up on their faith because of peer pressure or feeling that God does not answer their prayers.

Let us not lose heart. "Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (2 Corinthians 4:16-17).

Lord Jesus, help us to follow your example of endurance as you walked toward the cross. Fill us with courage to face changes head-on. Amen.

FACING LOSS

You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.
—Psalm 30:11

My first duty as a new pastor in Hong Kong was to assist in a funeral service. Other funerals soon followed, and I initially struggled at empathizing with families in their grief. This was partly due to my youth, since death had not yet touched my circle of friends and family. But I also thought believers *should* take the promise of the resurrection to heart.

As the years passed, I realized that facing the death of a family member needs more than just a theological reflection. The loss is felt physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. Arranging for a funeral is a tiring process. It's draining to deal with the financial aftermath, and emotional distress can resurface unexpectedly—even with just an occasional realization that the person is no longer around.

Though he knew that his friend Lazarus could be raised from the dead, Jesus wept with the other mourners because he felt their sorrow. Jesus did not scold their unbelief but instead acted to affirm their faith. Even today our Lord is able to “empathize with our weaknesses”; therefore, we should “approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:15-16).

Lord of the resurrection, comfort today all who are facing the loss of a loved one. Help us to remember that you “will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain” (Revelation 21:4). Amen.

CHANGE OF HEART

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
—Psalm 51:10

The act of creation brought about major changes—where there was once nothing, God created everything, the whole universe. For us personally, though, the greatest change occurs when Christ comes into our hearts as our Savior and Lord. Then everything about us changes.

Jesus said to Nicodemus (and to each one of us), “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” (John 3:3). Nicodemus was correct in saying that this could not happen naturally, but we know that all things are possible with God (Matthew 19:26). More than 500 years before Jesus spoke to Nicodemus, God had said to his people, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give

you a heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 36:26).

Though this change of heart is a miraculous onetime event, our hearts can sometimes stray and need to turn back to God. That is why the psalmist David asked God to cleanse him and “renew a steadfast spirit within” him. David knew personally the bitter experience of straying from God—his adultery had caused havoc in his life and family (see 2 Samuel 11-15). May we always be contrite and seek to be renewed by God daily.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart today; try me, O Savior, and know my thoughts, I pray. See if there be some wicked way in me; cleanse me from every sin, and set me free.”
In Christ, Amen.

CHANGE AGENT

“The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

—1 Samuel 16:7

This is an election year in the United States. The presidential campaign has been interesting because the fight to become the top candidate has been intense in both major parties.

No matter what country we live in, there are always high hopes when a new person enters public office, because there is the possibility for change. During a campaign, voters try to judge which candidate is more qualified and promising because they pin their hopes on electing a change agent.

The prophet Samuel had the same attitude. He thought that Jesse’s big, tall son Eliab would be the one chosen as the next king of Israel. But he was totally off the mark, because having a willingness to follow the Lord was much more important than any other qualities.

As Christian voters, do we consider whether a candidate is a person seeking after the Lord’s heart? Do we vote only with regard to whether a candidate is likable, or can make our economy stronger, or can make our lives safer? These may be important considerations, but they are not the most important. As Proverbs 21:1 puts it, “In the LORD’S hand the king’s heart is a stream of water that he channels toward all who please him.” The agent can bring change for the better only if the agent is being changed by the Lord.

Heavenly Father, help us to look beyond the superficial, both in ourselves and in others, to see the qualities that are important to you. In your Son’s name, Amen.

CHANGE IN DIRECTION

“What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.”
—Revelation 3:7

I have changed careers three times. While teaching school in Hong Kong, I felt called to be more equipped to serve the Lord, so I left my position to attend seminary in the United States. Little did I know that the Lord would prepare a pastoral vacancy back home for me by the time I graduated. Even further from my mind was that I would return to the States later to serve God in media ministry.

Summer is a good time for relocation and job changes. The weather is nice, and children are out of school for a few months. But how do we know if the change we are making is the right move? Or at the right time? Or in line with the will of God? In our reading from Acts today, Paul and his companions used their God-given wisdom and knowledge to plan a route for spreading the good news

of salvation in Christ. Their work was all for God's glory, but twice the Spirit prevented them. Then a door opened for them to go to Macedonia.

With this personal experience, Paul could say, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7).

Gracious God, help us to seek your direction in all our decision making, and may we use faithfully all the resources and opportunities you give us. Through Christ, Amen.

A NEW NAME

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!
—1 John 3:1

Many people change their names at least once during their lifetime. They may have a name change because of adoption, because they get married, because they move to a country that speaks another language, or perhaps just because they need a fresh start. Personally, I became “Jimmy” because my Hong Kong elementary school English teacher said we all needed an English name in addition to our Chinese name. While it takes time to adjust to a name change, we gradually grow used to it.

There is one name change that is not recorded on our passports, driver’s licenses, or any other identification. Yet, it is the most important name change of all. At the moment when we receive Jesus into our heart as Lord and Savior, we receive a new name: *Christian*—because

we have become a follower of Christ. Today’s reading in Isaiah says that this change was planned a long time ago because it is God who created us, formed us, redeemed us, and has summoned us. Indeed, we were chosen by God even before we were created, to be saved through the blood of Christ (Ephesians 1:3-8).

This name change not only comes with protection, honor, and privileges; it also brings tremendous responsibilities. “‘You are my witnesses’, declares the LORD, ‘that I am God.’”

Heavenly Father, thank you for choosing us as your children. Help us to respond in faith so that our lives can bear witness to your great love. In Christ’s name, Amen.

SAVING FOR THE BIG CHANGE

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."
—Hebrews 13:5

There is a Chinese saying, "Raise a son for your old age"—so that he can support you when you're old. Not too many Chinese people would put their trust in this saying anymore though.

My mailboxes (both email and postal mail) used to be stuffed with credit card applications, but more recently they have overflowed with info about retirement investing: "Catch up before it is too late"; "Don't rely on Social Security"; "You need at least a million dollars to retire"—and so on. Fear tactics are exploited to the maximum.

In the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-29), Jesus did commend the servant who invested wisely. Jesus also emphasized that we should plan ahead and count the cost (Luke 14:25-35). While these principles are mainly about serv-

ing him with all our heart, they can be helpful reminders about retirement too. On the other hand, Jesus also said we should not store up treasures on earth but rather store up treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19-20).

What should we do as we face our future in retirement? Planning is good and wise, but the key is to be content and to seek first God's kingdom, trusting that the Lord will provide everything we need, not only for life on earth but, more importantly, for life eternal (see Matthew 6:25-33; Philippians 4:11-13).

Heavenly Father, thank you for your provisions for this life and for the life to come. Help us to be content and willing to share with others in need. In Jesus' name, Amen.

LORD OF THE SEASONS

It was you who set all the boundaries of the earth; you made both summer and winter.
—Psalm 74:17

I love living in Chicago.

Not everyone may share this sentiment. Some people complain that it is too hot in July and too cold in January.

For me, living in Chicago gives me a clear sense of the four seasons—the blossoming of new life in spring, the sunny days of summer, the colorful leaves of fall, and the hexagonal snowflakes of winter.

I sometimes imagine that similar thoughts inspired pastor Maltbie Babcock, while he took walks along the Niagara Escarpment, to write “This is my Father’s world, and to my listening ears all nature sings, and round me rings the music of the spheres. . . . This is my Father’s world. Oh, let me ne’er forget that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the Ruler yet.”

We need reminders like this because at times it seems that the world around us can be chaotic. Natural disasters sweep over us, and we can feel so powerless. At other times we can be so proud of our achievements that we need the reminder that this is, after all, our Father’s world.

We can learn well from what Paul says in today’s Bible reading: “We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and . . . everything in them.”

“This is my Father’s world:
why should my heart be sad?
The Lord is King;
let the heavens ring! God reigns;
let earth be glad!”
In Christ, Amen.

CONFIDENCE IN PRAYER

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.

—1 John 5:14-15

“If God does not change, what is the use of praying?” We often hear this question from nonbelievers—and sometimes from Christians too. Without going into a heavy theological discussion, we can learn something about prayer from today’s reading in Genesis 18.

Abraham, appealing to God out of trust in him and with compassion for others, asks, “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? . . . Far be it from you to do such a thing. . . . Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” And, of course, the Lord says, “If I find [so many] righteous people . . . I will spare the whole place for their sake.” Further, God later shows he is faithful to his promises by giving Abraham’s nephew Lot and his family the opportunity to escape.

As he approached God with his questions, Abraham knew that God loves his people, in his anger at their wickedness. God is slow to act in anger, even when we deserve it. In the dialogue between Abraham and God, we can see that Abraham had confidence and trust in God, and that God was willing to listen and respond to all of Abraham’s questions.

John notes that if we pray in line with God’s will, we can trust that he hears and will respond accordingly. And, like Abraham, we will understand more and more of God’s will through dialogue with him.

Lord, guide us to trust in you, even if we have tough questions, and to pray according to your will. Amen.

BY ALL MEANS

I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.
—1 Corinthians 9:22

When I joined Back to God Ministries International in 1990, we used reel-to-reel tape recordings for radio programs. By the time I retired in 2015, the Chinese ministry was operating entirely online. The technological changes over the years have been phenomenal, to say the least; we can now connect one on one with our audience on multiple platforms (Facebook, WeChat, etc.) making the relationship both personal and engaging. In the past we could only estimate the ministry's impact, but now we can count interactions instantaneously. One thing, though, remains unchanged—the gospel (“good news”) message.

The apostle Paul said he was willing to use all kinds of ways to save some for the sake of the gospel. He treasured the gospel so much that he was will-

ing to work hard, go to prison, be exposed to death again and again, and face danger from nature, people, and government (2 Corinthians 11:23-30).

To Paul, there was (and is) only one gospel—“that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Anything different from this, no matter how appealing the package or the messenger, “is really no gospel at all” and should be condemned (Galatians 1:6-8). How can you share the good news that Christ died for us?

Thank you, Jesus, for your precious gospel. Help me to share it diligently and correctly every day. In your name, Amen.

DON'T FORGET

Be careful that you do not forget the LORD. . . .

—Deuteronomy 6:12

“He is physically OK, but I am losing him; he does not recognize me anymore.” Alzheimer’s disease is the sixth-leading cause of death in the United States and is the only one of the top 10 such diseases that cannot be prevented or cured. It is also one of the sicknesses most dreaded by a patient’s family. It is so sad to lose more of the patient each day and to watch him or her gradually lose memory and disappear into an isolated, confused world.

Memory is crucial to our daily life. It gives us a bearing on where we are and what we can do and say next. In giving the Israelites the Ten Commandments, God began with the words “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Exodus 20:2). These words gave the people a help-

ful reminder to follow God and to have hope for their future in the land he had promised them.

How can we remember the Lord? Like the Israelites, we can learn and talk about God’s Word each day, write it down, and use various methods to help us remember. As the psalmist says, “Blessed is the one . . . whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night” (Psalm 1:1-2). In Christ, who fulfills God’s law and his promises for us, we can grow closer to God by treasuring his Word as a light for our pathway through life (Psalm 119:105).

Father, have mercy on all who struggle with memory loss. Help us to remember your goodness to us always. In Jesus, Amen.

BIFOCALS

Their mind is set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.
—Philippians 3:19-20

I started wearing glasses when I was ten years old. My short-sightedness (myopia) continued to increase gradually and then stopped. By the time I reached fifty, I developed hyperopia (farsightedness) and had to use bifocal eyeglasses, with the top portion for distant viewing and the bottom section for close reading. I need both to carry on my normal daily life.

Some of you may have 20/20 vision, but all of us need a bifocal view in our everyday living. In Hebrews, the Old Testament heroes of faith are described as living by faith on earth while setting their eyes on a better place with God in heaven (Hebrews 11:13-16).

Like the saints of old, we need two perspectives, and we ought to prioritize them. Paul urges us, "Since . . . you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on

things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things."

Do you feel things are causing you to lose focus or to mix up your perspectives? Are you pre-occupied with your work, or school, or something else that draws or demands your attention? Ask God to help you re-focus and reset your priorities, so that you can "seek first his kingdom" in all that you do (Matthew 6:33).

Father, help me to navigate faithfully through life on earth while focusing on heaven. Help me to seek your will, following your way in all I do. In Christ's name, Amen.

DIET CHANGE

Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

—Philippians 4:8

As a young child, I ate what my parents fed me. As I grew older, I had more say and choices about the foods I would eat. Since I got married, my wife, who cooks most of our meals, has had a lot of influence over what I eat, and I've gladly accepted that.

Like most people my age, I've recently had to pay more attention to my sugar, salt, fat, and fiber intake. To stay healthy, we have to stay away from junk food and choose food wisely.

The same holds true in our spiritual life. The saying "you are what you eat" applies not only to diets but also to our daily living. The philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach in his essay "Concerning Spiritualism and Materialism" wrote metaphorically, "Man is what he eats." If we feed our minds on trivia, our

lives will be trivial. The psalmist knew this too, indicating that if we feed on the Word of God, we will be "like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season"

Do you pay attention to what you are taking in every day? Are you reading trashy literature, listening to ungodly music, or paying attention to gossip (in tabloids, in social networks, in conversations)? Or are you feeding on the living water that only Christ can provide (John 4:13-14; 7:38)?

Thank you, Jesus, for giving us the living water, your Word. May we feed on it daily and bear fruit for you. In your name, Amen.

WORKING RELATIONSHIP

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

—Ephesians 5:21

Our relationships change and become more complicated as we grow. We start out as children with parents and (probably) siblings and cousins. Then, as time goes on, friends, neighbors, coworkers, spouses, in-laws, and more come into the picture.

As relationships change, we need time to adjust to new roles. It is not always easy to look up to a new boss who used to be your peer, nor for a newlywed to appreciate the close bond that his or her spouse may have with family.

Paul says, “In your relationships with one another, you should have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.” Christ gave up his glory in heaven and humbled himself to become a human being like us. As a result, we have a Savior “who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet

he did not sin”; therefore Christ can “empathize with our weaknesses” (Hebrews 4:15). Since he understands how we feel in different relationships, we can approach the Lord “with confidence” to “receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

For a relationship to work, both parties need to follow Jesus’ example of standing in the other’s shoes. Are we willing to humble ourselves and submit to others “out of reverence for Christ”?

Father, help us to follow Christ’s example in building healthy relationships. Lord, be our mediator and give us extra patience when relationships get tense. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

GODLY AGING

Walk in obedience to all that the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live and prosper and prolong your days in the land that you will possess.
—Deuteronomy 5:33

Mature, seasoned, senior—no matter what word is used, the message conveyed by these words is “old.” Scientists differ on the matter of when humans stop growing in their lifetime and start the process of becoming old. Some pessimists would say that a person begins dying as soon as he or she is born.

A lot of things can make it difficult, even miserable, to grow old—deteriorating health, the death of friends and loved ones, losing touch with society, financial difficulties, and more. Changes like these are hard to swallow, but Paul reminds us they are temporary. We can age gracefully if we have an attitude of recognizing that “inwardly we are being renewed day by day.”

The Bible talks about long life as a reward for obedience to God. Proverbs 16:31 adds that

“gray hair is a crown of splendor; it is attained in the way of righteousness.” If one is able to lead a life of righteousness in Christ, growing old is an honor. In Leviticus 19:32 the younger ones among God’s people are reminded, “Show respect for the elderly and revere your God.”

I pray that our older readers may live a life that is pleasing to God and filled with blessings. I also pray that the younger generations will honor them, learn from their experience, and praise God for their witness and example (Matthew 5:16).

Help us, Lord, to age with grace, and help the younger generations to honor the elderly. In your name, Amen.

CHANGE OR NO CHANGE

“Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”
—Lamentations 3:22-23

As I finish writing this month’s devotions, I have been retired for several months already. Many of the changes I anticipated have already taken place, but I am sure there will be more to come. I have learned so far that you can never be too prepared for changes. They will come in all shapes and forms, even at unexpected times. But I have also learned that it helps to have a positive attitude that rests in God’s unchanging love: “His compassions never fail. . . . Great is [his] faithfulness.”

In our Bible reading for today, it seems Jesus’ disciples wanted to stay on the mountain because they felt good about what was happening. The disciples wished that time could freeze and they could keep treasuring the moment—close fellowship with the Master and the saints, far away from all the busyness, sickness,

conflict, worry, and trouble in the world. Who would not agree with them? But Jesus said to them, “Get up,” and “Don’t be afraid.”

He says, “Get up,” because neither the world nor we can stand still—and changes, both internal and external, are unavoidable. And he says, “Don’t be afraid,” because the changes are ultimately for our good—and nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39).

Faithful God, with your “pardon for sin and a peace that endureth” and your “own dear presence to cheer and to guide,” grant us “strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow”! Amen.

RECOGNIZING GOD AND HIS WORD

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

—Genesis 1:1

In the words of Genesis 1:1, the first sentence in the Bible, God explains that he is the creator of our universe and everything in it.

That declaration is often under attack, however. Some people suggest that the universe happened entirely by chance, but that's not a logical conclusion. How does something come from nothing? And consider all the complexity of the amazing systems operating so beautifully—from way out in space to within the cells of the human body, and even deeper into the molecules they are made of. Creation is not an accident. God designed the universe and created us with purpose.

Attacking God's reign is nothing new. The psalmist observed it in his day: "Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth

rise up and the rulers band together against the LORD . . ."

Is God shaken because of attacks against him and his Word? No. "The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. He rebukes them in his anger." Heaven has a response to what we believe.

The psalmist advises, "Be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear and celebrate his rule with trembling."

Are you serving the Creator God today?

Father, thank you for creating us. Though we may have many questions, guide us to trust you and your Word to be a light to our path. In Jesus' name, Amen.

BATTLE OF REPENTANCE

The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?"

—Genesis 4:6-7

While Cain is angry, God urges him to do what is right. God also warns Cain not to let sin become his master: "It desires to have you, but you must rule over it." But Cain ignored God and soon murdered his brother.

When God speaks to Cain again, we might expect Cain to be trembling before the Lord and seeking mercy. We might also expect God to execute Cain for committing murder. Instead, we witness Cain being totally self-focused, while God is gracious. The Lord gives Cain every opportunity to repent. But Cain is so full of himself that instead of confessing his sin and seeing the pain of his brother, he complains, "My punishment is more than I can bear."

The road to restoration is repentance, but it is a difficult road. We so often let pride rule us, claiming that our actions are

justified and that someone or something else is at fault. Like Cain, we are also often heartless and exclaim, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

In godly repentance we must come to our senses and own our wrongdoing. We must confess our sins before God. This takes humility and a great deal of strength. God's grace and love enable us to break from our destructive self and live in freedom. *Forgive us, Lord, for we have sinned.*

Loving Father, I have sinned against heaven and earth. Blot out my selfishness and my offenses before you. I come to your cross seeking to be reconciled. In Jesus' name, Amen.

TRUTH

Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist.
—Ephesians 6:14

A decade ago I had to give up jogging because I was feeling some pain in my chest. I thought this was a sign of my age and an indication that I had to slow down. My wife told me I should be checked by a doctor. I did not listen to her good advice.

Later, my chiropractor told me to go straight to the emergency room at the local hospital. I listened this time. After a number of tests I was scheduled for an exploratory procedure. I was able to watch on a screen as a camera traveled inside a major artery toward my heart.

The truth was that I had a clogged artery. I had been trying to treat some deadly symptoms by slowing down. The doctor treated the clogged artery by poking a wire through the blockage and inserting a stent.

God tells us that the illness with the human race is sin. As our great physician, he knows we need a Savior. The only way to treat the problem of sin is to receive Jesus, God's Son, as our Savior—he died in our place to pay the debt of our sin. As we confess our sins and declare Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we receive new, eternal life.

Do you trust in God to save you through the finished work of Jesus Christ?

Father, thank you for the people in our life who show us the way to health and life. Thank you especially for providing the way to treat the problem of our sin. Grant us the humility to seek help and to entrust ourselves to your care and keeping. Amen.

STAND

When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.

—Psalm 73:16-17

A woman shared how she had walked away from God because of all the evil and suffering in the world. Why would a good God let so much evil and suffering happen?

The psalmist in today's verses tells us that he too almost slipped in his relationship with God. He had doubts when he saw the prosperity of the wicked. Why do ruthless, selfish, cut-throat people do so well? Why do the unjust prosper?

What is the solution to the doubts that often cause us to struggle? The psalmist says that his doubts troubled him deeply until he "entered the sanctuary of God." Even if we are in a place of unbelief and filled with doubts, we can find healing in a community of believers who reach out to God in praise and worship. God is bigger than our intellect, so engaging him with

our heart and emotion can help us to grow spiritually.

And what the psalmist came to learn in God's presence was that the wicked, who honor nothing, have nothing in the end. They are swept away while the righteous are strengthened to stand. We can hold on to God, who continually holds us. Further, the psalmist finds he must share the good news. "It is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds." In the strength that only God can give, may we all echo these words.

Father, we wrestle with doubts and unbelief. Help us to overcome our unbelief as we enter your presence to find the Savior who loves us. Amen.

FIERY ARROWS

Take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.
—Ephesians 6:16

In the movie *Braveheart*, the medieval English forces line up against William Wallace's Scottish forces. The Scots shoot flaming arrows at the English, who are unaware that the field has been covered with oil. As the flaming arrows set the field on fire, a whole segment of the English army is taken out of the battle at once.

In our spiritual battle against the forces of evil, the enemy uses "flaming arrows" against us. Arrows on fire are effective because they cause a distraction from the main battle. You cannot fight both fire and the enemy at once.

In his wisdom, God gave us a tool to protect us from "the flaming arrows of the evil one." He gave us "the shield of faith." As the evangelist Reinhard Bonnke puts it, "Faith is the passport and visa into the

kingdom of God and all its resources." Faith is the conduit that connects us with the great powers of God and his Word. Through the gift of faith God's light, salvation, strength, and healing come, because God is faithful to us.

As flaming arrows fly at you, God, like a great bird, "will cover [you] with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart" (Psalm 91:4).

With God protecting us, the enemy will have to get past God before he can get to us. What a comfort!

You, O Lord, are a shield around me. Thank you for your protection from the fiery arrows of the evil one. In you I put my trust. Amen.

SET FREE

When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him.

—Mark 5:6

Jesus met a man who was deeply conflicted, a madman. The local community had tried to restrain him with shackles and chains. But nothing had worked. Now he lived outside the community in caves where the people buried their dead. He could often be heard crying out among the hills and tombs, and he “cut himself with stones.” His situation seemed hopeless, with no one to help.

Can you relate to this man? Have you had dreams and aspirations that have been dashed? Is your internal pain so great that you have thought about harming yourself? Has your community tried to help, only to restrain you in some way?

Jesus came to help this man, and we can see that even a Gentile madman mattered to him. The message is clear. In the midst of our madness, Jesus

cares about us and is willing to bring healing. We all matter to Jesus! Everyone does!

This man, who was teeming with demons, saw Jesus coming. “He ran and fell on his knees in front of him.” Shame, defilement, guilt, and uncleanness are not able to keep anyone from Jesus.

Jesus helped him, saying, “Come out of this man, you impure spirit!” And the man was freed, restored to his right mind.

Has Jesus freed you from the madness of overpowering sin? Run to him today!

Jesus, thank you for drawing us to you and giving us hope in the midst of our sin. We thank you for giving us freedom. Amen.

THE PRICE OF FREEDOM

The people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

—Mark 1:17

After Jesus freed a man from demon possession, the people of the town saw two things: a man clothed and in his right mind, and a herd of two thousand pigs drowned in the sea. Fear captured their hearts. They responded by pleading with Jesus to *go away*. It is a sad commentary when a society is more concerned about economic interests than seeing their brothers and sisters in their right minds.

Are we any different? Are we passionate about sharing with others the good news of God's love for us all? Is making disciples a priority for us and our church community? Or are we too afraid of the economic and social cost? Discipleship has a cost that some are not willing to pay.

Fear caused the people of the town to ask Jesus to leave. They may well have been thinking,

"If it cost two thousand pigs to restore one madman, what will it cost to have Jesus do more in our town?"

One rescued life is priceless. It is exhilarating. God's kingdom has advanced where hell had a foothold. The light has pierced the darkness.

What has it cost Jesus to save us? What are we willing to do so that people can be saved? Where can we make change happen?

Lord Jesus, thank you for the great love you showed for the afflicted man who needed your help. Thank you for dying in our place to pay for our sin. Help us to be willing to pay the price of following you into the life of freedom. In your name, Amen.

CHARACTER

God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness."

—Genesis 1:26

Tiger Woods might be the most famous golfer today. He stands out because he was a gifted winner of competitions for many years. But Tiger Woods's life fell apart because of various indiscretions. His success in public did not match his failures at home.

As imagebearers of God, we are designed to be people of integrity and character. A person of integrity is one who does right in all areas of life, one who can be trusted. If people compromise in one area, they cannot be trusted in others.

As we look at God's image and see his character, we find that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). In Malachi 3:6 the Lord says, "I . . . do not change." He is completely stable and trustworthy. We can trust God because he is faith-

ful and true to his character. As a result of his integrity, "The name of the LORD is a fortified tower; the righteous run to it and are safe" (Proverbs 18:10).

God expects us, his imagebearers, to be people of integrity. James speaks of people who are double-minded and unstable in all they do. He says they are "like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind." If we lack character in one area of our life, it will affect the other areas of our life. But by Christ's Spirit, we can find the strength to live as God desires us to live.

Father, thank you for making us in your image. Help us to live in a way that always reflects your character and honors you. In Jesus, Amen.

MARRIAGE REFLECTING GOD'S CHARACTER

God has blessed you forever. . . . Ride forth victoriously in the cause of truth, humility and justice —Psalm 45:2-4

Marriages today are so easily ended. Divorce has become routine. Breaking relationships designed to last a lifetime results in many broken hearts and homes.

Psalm 45 is written as a wedding song for a king. The first several verses describe a king who rules with integrity and justice, reflecting God's character.

This mighty ruler is clothed with splendor and majesty. He is called "the most excellent of men." His lips are "anointed with grace," meaning that his speech is life-giving, gentle, and kind. God is the commander of this man's life; he recognizes God's anointing of grace and of joy. He loves righteousness and hates wickedness, revealing his heart to be in tune with God's heart. He seeks truth, humility, and justice.

I want to challenge the men who are reading these words to take note that God and his Word must be central in our lives. If anything is out of line, we must be truthful and humble to seek God's direction in setting it right. Have we dropped our guard and allowed anything unwholesome to intrude? If we are married, are we giving up the fight and deserting our wives and families?

Let's look to the Lord for guidance in our relationships—especially in marriage and family relationships. He alone can help us.

Father, thank you for all your blessings, and guide us to live for you in truth, humility, and justice. If we have fallen short, forgive us and restore us, in Christ, to live for you. Amen.

NOBLE CHARACTER, REFLECTING WISDOM

A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. Her husband has full confidence in her . . .

—Proverbs 31:10-11

As we reflect on marriage again today, let's consider the way of wisdom described in Proverbs. Proverbs 31 famously summarizes many virtues and blessings of godly Wisdom, personified as a woman earlier in the book (see Proverbs 1:20-23; 8:1-9:12) and contrasted with another woman named Folly (see Proverbs 9:13-18).

In Proverbs 31, Wisdom is personified as a "wife of noble character," but, as another writer has put it, "this chapter is not dictating how godly mothers and wives are supposed to act." Instead, it shows how all God's people can practice wisdom in their daily lives.

The life of wisdom and noble character is indeed busy! Creative in business and agriculture, using the resources God provides, considering opportunities for growth and

improvement, sharing with the poor and needy, diligently working toward the future with the sure hope of blessing—this life honors God not only with hard work but also with "faithful instruction," so that others may see the way of wisdom and God may be praised.

Men and women who seek to honor God are guided by wisdom, one of God's great gifts for living. If they are married, a wife and husband should work together to glorify and serve God. And we all, whether married or single, are to blossom into all God created us to be.

Father, help us all to faithfully reflect your love and design for our lives. In Jesus, our perfect example of wise living, we pray. Amen.

THE FAITH OF RAHAB

"I know that the LORD has given you this land and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you."
—Joshua 2:9

The people of Israel were about to enter the land of Canaan. Joshua sent two of his men, saying, "Go, look over the land . . . especially Jericho."

The spies found a city of palms, an oasis on a well-traveled road, a gateway into the land of Canaan. The city was on about eight to nine acres of land and had a population of about 1,200 people. The complex of walls around the city reached a height of about 45 feet from the surrounding ground level. Inside the city the people, ruled by a king, were well-armed and fiercely warlike.

The spies met Rahab, a prostitute who had faith in their God, and she hid them in her home. When the king sent some men to seize the spies, Rahab said they had already left. Later she said to them, prophetically, "I

know that the LORD has given you this land"

Physically, Jericho appeared impenetrable. But this city was under the sentence of the judgment of God. Their sin had reached its fullness (see Genesis 15:13-21), and soon the city would lie in a heap of ruins.

God opened Rahab's heart so that she could see the invisible. Do we have that kind of faith? Are we open to what God says through his Word and his Spirit, so that we can follow his leading?

Father, we pray that the eyes of our hearts may be opened to see you and your plan for our world. We, your servants, ask that your will may be done. In Jesus, Amen.

IN NEED OF HOPE

He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life."

—1 Kings 19:4

Our community was shocked recently when a 21-year-old man shot himself. On the outside, he seemed to have it all together. He had good health, a girlfriend, a home, friends, and a family. He had completed high school and was set to make a difference in the world.

But internally he must have been suffering and struggling. We can only wonder how he may have wrestled with disillusionments or disappointments.

In 1 Kings 19 we find the great prophet Elijah in the desert. He had come to a place of hopelessness. From this place of emptiness and depression, Elijah turned to God in prayer. He did not take his own life, but asked God to take his life for him.

However, God met him in that place and sent an angel to help

him. Elijah received some desperately needed food and rest, and when he was fortified, he traveled for forty days to the mountain of God. There God revealed to Elijah some more plans he had for him.

Sometimes we may feel that we are at the end of our rope. As we struggle in life, it is critical that we seek God's face. He alone can give us hope and direction. Nothing can separate us from his love. Nothing!

Father, we grieve over loss of life and situations of hopelessness in this world. We are hungry for direction from you. By your Spirit and your Word, show us your will and give us hope, we pray. Amen.

TWO OPINIONS

"If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him."

—1 Kings 18:21

We are people with a choice. Whom shall we worship as God? The Lord? Our wallets? Our political party's opinions?

Elijah confronted his people with a choice. Choose the Lord God, or choose King Ahab, his wife Jezebel, and their idol Baal. God had long ago told his people to worship him only (Exodus 20:3-4), but when Ahab married Jezebel, a foreign princess, she introduced the worship of her god, Baal, in Israel. Ahab set up an altar and temple for Baal and "did more to arouse the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than did all the kings of Israel before him" (1 Kings 16:33). Jezebel began to kill off the Lord's prophets (1 Kings 18:4), and God had now sent Elijah to put a stop to all this.

It appears the people wanted to worship both Baal and God.

But this angered the Lord, and, through Elijah, God asked the people, "How long will you waver between two opinions?"

To that question today someone might respond, "Why choose between two gods? Aren't they all valid?" But God says, "I am the LORD . . . I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols" (Isaiah 42:8). Elijah challenged the people to see if an idol would answer them. Baal was silent, but God's power came through as fire consumed the altar and the water around it. The people exclaimed, "The LORD—he is God!" Do you trust the one and only God as your God?

Lord, we glorify your name because you alone are the true God, worthy of all honor and praise. In Jesus' name, Amen.

GOD OR MONEY

“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” —Matthew 6:24

Jesus makes clear that we must choose who will be our master—God or money. As God’s servants, he wants our total allegiance. Let’s compare these two masters.

The Lord tells us to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Money says we should hold on to what we have so that we can be secure. God says that we reap what we sow (Galatians 6:7). Money says we should do whatever it takes to get ahead because “the person with the most toys wins.” Jesus said, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s [in taxes] and to God what is God’s” (Mark 12:17). Money says it’s OK to cheat the government because they are poor money managers anyway. God calls us to be generous. Money calls us to be selfish and to hoard our wealth.

God says, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). Money says we should not give, because we will not have enough to provide for our needs.

As Christ-followers, we make a difference in our world by living in a way opposite to the god of money. As our faith in Jesus grows, our lives are marked by selflessness, generosity, and love. The world hungers for Christ and the richness he brings through us.

Whom do you follow?

Father, we commit our lives afresh to you. We trust in your unfailing love and look forward to the creative ways you will provide for us. Amen.

WORLD CHANGERS

“The LORD who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine.”

—1 Samuel 17:37

Our world is smeared with hopelessness, helplessness, and worthlessness. But God wants us to know our worth and have fulfillment in life. He wants us to be world changers. He wants us to move beyond the status quo to help people enter his kingdom.

David was young and inexperienced. According to his brother Eliab, he did not have the right attitude. He was not properly equipped. Yet God used David, an unlikely warrior, to move Israel from a place of defeat to a place of victory.

When David arrived on the battlefield, he saw that the Israelites were paralyzed with fear because of the giant Goliath. But David knew this was the Lord's battle, so he spoke with words of hope: “Who is this . . . Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?

. . . Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine.” From a human point of view, Goliath had the most advanced equipment and the experience of a champion warrior, while David was just a teenager with no armor and no battle experience. But David knew this was the Lord's battle. So he moved past all the obstacles and took this opponent down.

As God's people on this earth, and with his help, we too can use the skills and limited resources we have to change our world and help God increase his kingdom.

Father, the battle is yours, and we are your servants. Our faith is in you as we face terrifying and fearful things in our lives. We will not fear, for you are with us. Amen.

REVIVING OLD WELLS

Isaac reopened the wells that had been dug in the time of his father Abraham, which the Philistines had stopped up

—Genesis 26:18

Throughout the history of the church, many Christian communities have been wells of living water that have helped to provide spiritual life. They have brimmed with people praising God, but now in some places the living water in old churches and cathedrals is running out. They once were places where their surrounding communities found sustenance and strength in God, but now many are empty reminders of the past.

Isaac was called to remain in the land and avoid going away to Egypt in a time of famine (Genesis 26:1-6). Egypt had abundant fresh water and fertile land even in times of famine, but Canaan was barren and dry. Isaac was called to trust in God for his security during this lean time. He obeyed God and redug wells in the places his father Abraham had dug. He

experienced setbacks because of quarreling and was unable to keep the first two wells. He then moved and dug a third well, “and no one quarreled over it.” So “he named it Rehoboth, saying, ‘Now the Lord has given us room and we will flourish in the land.’”

Today we need people with courage who share God’s love and help to revive old wells to bring living water again. Even in troubled times we can take heart, because God will make room for us and fill us with living water. May we overflow with God’s love to everyone!

Lord, thank you for spiritual ancestors who faithfully tended wells of living water. By your Spirit, may old wells nourish communities again. Amen.

THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT

Take . . . the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

—Ephesians 6:17

In our ongoing battle with the forces of evil, the Lord commands, “Take . . . the sword of the Spirit.” This is the only weapon we are given among all the combat equipment mentioned in this Bible passage. And what is this weapon? “The sword of the Spirit . . . is the word of God.”

Hebrews 4:12 describes it this way: “The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” Our enemy hates this weapon. He was repelled by the Word of God as he tempted Jesus in the wilderness (see Matthew 4:1-11).

On the festival of Pentecost, as Peter preached the good news of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit, the sword of the

Spirit “cut [people] to the heart,” and they cried out, “What shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). The Word exposed their sin, and Peter explained the solution: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). Hell lost its grip on three thousand people that day as they found freedom in Jesus.

God’s Word is the true story of how God loves us at great cost to him. Can you see why it’s so important to spend time in God’s Word and make it part of our daily lives?

Father, thank you for your Word, which is alive and active, and by which we can battle the forces of evil. We treasure your Word and thank you for the life it brings. Amen.

KING OF GLORY

Lift up your heads, you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.
—Psalm 24:7

Where is the King of glory today? Psalm 24 says that “the earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it,” so the King of glory must be present and working everywhere in this world, right?

Yes, the Lord is present and working in amazing ways. But not everyone wants the King of glory to be the Lord of their life. Our sin often gets in the way of seeking God and trusting him for everything we need. We have to ask ourselves, “Is God welcome in our homes, schools, businesses, public offices?” Or is there a “Do not enter” sign posted in some places where we think we don’t need God, or where we think the Lord would spoil our freedom to do as we please?

The psalmist, King David of Israel, declares, “Lift up your heads, you gates . . . that the King of glory may come in.” These words reestablish that the

King of glory was at the heart of the community of ancient Israel and should be at the center of our lives today. These words are prophetic, pointing in David’s day to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ on this earth—and reminding us today that he has come. The Lord Almighty has established his kingdom, and he has freed us from sin so that we can stand in God’s presence with “clean hands and a pure heart.”

Today the Lord is seeking men and women who are passionate about his glory and good news. Are you among them?

King of glory, you are welcome in this place. The gates and doors are open wide for you. We are filled with joy and praise as we celebrate your presence. Amen.

OPEN OUR EYES

Elisha prayed, "Open his eyes, LORD, that he may see." . . . He looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.
—2 Kings 6:17

Elisha's servant was looking but not seeing. He saw the army of Aram surrounding their town, but he did not see the host of angels protecting God's people. He was walking in spiritual blindness.

We can be the same way. We might see only disappointments, or discouragements, or enemies all around. We might fear the stranger, complain about the lazy, and point fingers at those who disagree. We might fear that the world is lost to the devil, and we are the ones who suffer. We might be baited with putting God aside so that we can earn our fortune and have fun, only to experience everlasting loss.

Elisha's prayer is a great way to address our blindness to God's rule. We can pray, "Open our eyes, Lord, that we may see." When our eyes are opened,

we see sin as sin and the lust of the flesh as rebellion against God. And we see that Jesus has already won the victory. Christ already rules in heaven. This world is all in his hands. Have no fear, for we know that God wins.

When the Lord opened the servant's eyes, "he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha." These heavenly hosts were surrounding and protecting them. The servant's fear melted away. If God is on our side, who can stand against us?

Lord, open our eyes so that we can see you are on our side. Help us to live fearless lives in a hostile world, with your protection. In Jesus, Amen.

LOOK TO JESUS

“Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.”
—Isaiah 45:22

Growing up in a Christian family in which his father was a minister, Charles Spurgeon reported that he thought highly of his own good character, but he eventually realized that he wasn't truly convicted of his sin until he reflected on all he had been taught about the Ten Commandments. Sometime later, one Sunday in the 1850s, when Spurgeon was on his way to church in a snowstorm, he was unable to reach his church and decided to attend a Methodist chapel along the way. Only twelve people were there. No minister was present. Eventually a poor man went up to the pulpit, opened the Bible to Isaiah 45:22, and read, “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth.”

Then, describing Jesus, the man preached, “Look unto me; I am hanging on the cross. Look:

I am dead and buried. Look unto me; I rise again. Look unto me; I ascend; I am sitting at the Father's right hand.” He went on for a few minutes till he noticed Charles, a stranger in the audience, and said, “Young man, you look very miserable. And you will always be miserable . . . if you do not obey the text. . . . Look to Jesus Christ. Look!”

A cloud lifted for Charles. He looked to Jesus, his heart was transformed, and he went on to become a remarkable preacher for the rest of his life.

It sounds so simple. But what Jesus had to do for us was incredibly difficult. It's all about God's unfailing love and grace. Will you look to Jesus?

Lord, we look to you, for salvation is from you and you alone. We praise you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

VICTORY FROM THE ACCUSER

"They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony . . ."
—Revelation 12:11

Satan is the great accuser of Christians, and he accuses us day and night. He whispers at us, saying, "You are no good. You're a filthy rotten sinner. God will never love you, and you'll never measure up. You're doomed!" Satan also tempts us and encourages us to sin, luring us with the ideas that sin is fun and fulfilling and that everyone does it anyway. Then, when we fall, he accuses us all over again.

God speaks to us about our sin also—not to condemn us but to convict us. God's Word is not intended to smother us like a wet blanket but to make us aware of our sin *and* the way out. God comes to save us so that we may have freedom and new life in him.

Followers of Jesus have "triumphed over [the devil] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony." In the

movie *Luther*, Martin Luther says, "I saw God as terrible, unforgiving . . . and sentencing sinners to burn in hell for all eternity. I was wrong. . . . If you truly believe Jesus as your Savior, then we have a God of love. When the devil throws your sins in your face and tells you that you deserve death and hell, tell him, 'What of it?' For I know one who has suffered and made satisfaction on my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, Son of God. Where he is, there I will be also."

Do you trust in this God who has suffered and died on your behalf? That is victory.

Jesus, we know the wages of sin is death, but your great love has brought us freedom and new life. Thank you for the victory we have through your blood. Amen.

CHRISTIANS IN A HOSTILE WORLD

Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

—1 Peter 2:12

In the first century A.D. there were many persecutions of Christians—and persecution has continued to follow believers in Christ at many times and in many places ever since. Today we still hear of persecution, especially in societies where it is seen as unacceptable or even illegal to confess your faith in Jesus Christ.

The apostle Peter wrote a letter to persecuted believers in the Roman Empire around A.D. 60-64, and these words still ring true for us today: “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”

Christians march to a different beat than do people who do not follow Christ. In the first century, Christians confessed Jesus Christ as their Lord, not

Caesar. Husbands treated their wives with dignity, respect, and faithfulness. Baby girls were not abandoned (as was the Roman custom), and Christians took in abandoned babies as their own. When epidemics struck, believers stayed in the cities to help care for their own families and others, at the risk of their own lives. God was glorified. Believers made God look good, and the world noticed.

The world needs this testimony today as well. Does your behavior make God look good?

Father, we want to reflect you in all we do. Thank you for sending your Son into this sin-broken world to give us life. Use our lives to continue to reflect your heart. Amen.

DARING TO DREAM

Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more.
—Genesis 37:5

Great outcomes often begin with dreams. Immigrants dream of a better life in another country. Martin Luther King, Jr., dreamed of a world without racial discrimination. Joseph had dreams that suggested he would be a powerful leader.

But dreams can be dangerous. Joseph's dreams stirred the hatred of his brothers. They did not like the idea of bowing down to Joseph. His dreams resulted in the brothers saying, "Here comes that dreamer! . . . Come now, let's kill him. . . ." Joseph's dreams brought him to a pit and then into slavery. Later he was put in prison on false charges (Genesis 39).

Sometimes our dreams too may be crushed. When that happens, we have a choice. We can become bitter and angry about being treated unjustly, or we can forgive those who hurt us.

Joseph saw God's hand at work in his life. After many years, when he was reunited with his brothers, he said, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish . . . the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20). Even in the midst of evil, God worked behind the scenes to protect Joseph and make him into a great leader.

Joseph's dreams brought deliverance for many lives. His life pointed to the great deliverer who was to come, Jesus Christ. God is at work in our dreams also. Do you trust him to see you through?

Father, thank you for the dreams you give. And when we cannot make sense out of our lives, help us to trust that you are working all things for good. In Jesus, Amen.

FEARLESS

The Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.
—2 Timothy 1:7

Our daughter once went on a mission trip to San Pedro Sula, Honduras. While she was there, a man using a machine gun shot at one of her group's buses. The mission organization contacted the parents, shared what happened, and asked if we wanted our daughter sent home early. My immediate thought was that our daughter was in a place that was in desperate need of the gospel and that we needed to step up prayers for her safety. One of our friends commented, "That is the one of the most dangerous cities in the world! What are you doing sending your daughter there?"

My response was that "God has not given us a spirit of fear" (another way of interpreting our verse for today), and yet others would argue that we should act with a sound mind and not put the Lord "to the test" (Luke

4:12). In the midst of all this, our adventuresome daughter let us know that she wanted to complete the mission work.

Hearing God's call is critical in order to go forward. It may lead us to a calm, peaceful life. Or it may lead to a life in a lions' den, a fiery furnace, or some other dangerous persecution. Whatever happens, however, the Lord is with us in any and every situation.

Father, we are listening to your leading. Give us a fearless spirit, because sometimes we can find ourselves in very hostile territory. We know that you are with us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

STUCK

Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.
—Luke 18:1

Have you ever been stuck? Imagine you have an adversary who is making your life extremely difficult. Certified letters come in the mail, and you are summoned to a court hearing. You have prayed, and it seems that God is not acting on your behalf. You ask God, “If you are my Father, why don’t you help me?” In the courtroom, the judge adds insults to your injury and has no empathy for you. Where do you turn?

Jesus told a parable about a woman in a situation like that, to show his followers that they should “always pray and not give up.” The woman wanted what was rightfully hers. And yet she appeared to be powerless, without money or connections to bail her out, and she lost case after case. But she continued to bother the judge. This harsh judge, who didn’t care what God

or people thought, finally acted on her behalf, and she received what was rightfully hers.

In the midst of hopelessness in this world, Jesus promises hope in a far greater courtroom, where he defends his own. He says, “Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.”

Followers of Christ are called to be persistent in the midst of adversity, for we have a mighty Advocate who comes to our defense!

Lord Jesus, thank you for giving us hope in our dark times as we wrestle against adversaries. Hear our prayer and act quickly on our behalf. Amen.

CONNECTING WITH THE KING

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

King Xerxes of ancient Persia was tricked into issuing a decree that all Jews in his kingdom were to be killed for being different. Though he didn't know it, his queen, Esther, was also Jewish, so she had a death threat hanging over her. How would God work this out?

After fasting to seek God's help, Esther dressed in her royal robes and boldly entered the king's hall to petition the king. Her beauty and charm had captured the heart of the king to marry her; now she had to trust, in God's strength, that the king would grant her a hearing even though she came without being summoned, potentially a capital offense.

The favor of God was on Esther as the king held out his scepter, sparing her life. The business at hand was dismissed, and Esther was invited into the presence of

the king. She entered with the bearing of a queen and a bride. The king asked, “What is your request?”

Esther requested a banquet to engage the heart of the king, and she eventually pleaded for mercy for her people (see Esther 5). Through Esther's boldness, God saved her and her people from destruction.

The church is the bride of Christ, and each one of us is dearly loved by the King of kings. We can overcome great obstacles as we lean on his favor to ask for his help with all our concerns. We know we can always look to him, our only hope, our Savior and Lord.

King Jesus, you are our only hope. Fill us with courage to trust and serve you faithfully. In your name we pray. Amen.

PURITY

[Samson] did not know that the LORD had left him.

—Judges 16:20

The story of Samson in the book of Judges is full of intrigue. Looking at Samson's story can give us great insights into how his private life affected his public life as a leader of God's people.

Samson had a specific calling, to lead in the deliverance of Israel from the enemy Philistines. He was also to be a Nazirite, which meant he was not to touch alcohol, his hair was never to be cut, and he was not to do anything unclean. All of this meant he was specially set apart to serve the Lord. (See Judges 13:1-5.)

But Samson did not lead a pure life. He ate honey from the carcass of a lion, making him unclean. He slept with a prostitute. Then he fell in love with a Philistine woman, and she tried to learn the secret of his great strength. Eventually

she wore him down, and he revealed that his hair had never been cut. When she cut his hair, "his strength left him." The Philistines then blinded him and made him a slave, for "the LORD had left him."

What we do in private makes an impact on all the areas of our life. We need to come clean before the Lord, asking for forgiveness and resolving to live in a way that shows we are God's people.

Is God at the center of your private life as well as your public life?

Father, nothing is hidden from you. Help us to learn from Samson's story that we need to be faithful to you. Give us a discerning heart to follow you in all areas of our life. In Jesus, Amen.

PROMISE KEEPING

Peter declared, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you."
—Matthew 26:35

In the movie *It Can Happen to You*, a police officer is unable to pay a tip, so he promises the waitress half of a lottery winning the next day if he wins. He wins four million dollars. His wife does not want him to share the money with the waitress. Cage has to decide whether or not to keep his promise, which he does at a price.

Peter made a promise to Jesus: "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." Yet later that night Peter "wept bitterly" because he had denied three times that he knew Jesus, who had now been arrested. How could Peter be a loyal friend at one moment and then disown Jesus the next?

If we are honest, we have to admit that we could have done the same. Peter was probably afraid that he could be arrested and sentenced with Jesus. In

fact, all of Jesus' disciples deserted him that night. Alone outside at dawn, Peter wept bitterly, having broken his relationship with Jesus. But thankfully Peter's relationship with Jesus did not end there. After his death and resurrection, Jesus forgave and restored Peter to serve him more boldly than before (John 21:15-19).

Our world is full of broken promises. Yet at the center of life is the promise-keeping God who went to the cross to restore our broken world and our broken lives, calling us to serve. We might fail, but God never does.

Father, thank you for providing a way back into relationship with you even after we fail. May we serve you faithfully and boldly for Jesus' sake. Amen.

CALLED BACK TO GOD

Elijah . . . prayed: "LORD . . . let it be known today that you are God. . . ."
—1 Kings 18:36

When Ahab and Jezebel ruled in Israel, wickedness ran wild. Selfishness, oppression, and idolatry flourished (1 Kings 16:29-33).

Again and again in the Old Testament, the Lord had sent prophets to confront injustice and call people to worship God—and only God—with their whole lives.

The prophets had the particular job of proclaiming God's Word. They reminded the people of God's instruction. They proclaimed that the Lord alone is God, and that as his people, we should reflect God's character. We have been saved with a purpose: to restore justice and righteousness in the culture around us so that God will be glorified in the flourishing of all things. In short, the prophets proclaimed what the kingdom of God was supposed to look like.

Empowered by God's Spirit, Elijah opposed Ahab for abusing his God-given reign for personal gain. Elijah confronted Jezebel for corrupting the people and killing God's prophets (1 Kings 18:4). Elijah finally called on the people to turn back to God, and God displayed his power so that the people proclaimed, "The LORD—he is God!"

You too are a prophet. You too are called to show God's love and justice to the people around you. Are you ready?

Father, in your strength, may we be fearless to show who is Lord in our lives. And if we have strayed, call us back to serve you faithfully. In Jesus' name, Amen.

FASTING AND PRAYER

Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the LORD, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah. The people of Judah came together to seek help from the LORD. . . .
—2 Chronicles 20:3-4

Do you ever feel stuck spiritually? Maybe your life seems in a rut, and you have no idea how to grow. What can you do?

God has provided us with many spiritual disciplines to help us get closer to him, such as prayer and fasting.

In the Old Testament we find that God's people often fasted and prayed in times of repentance and in times of great distress, recognizing they needed the deliverance that only God could give.

Jehoshaphat did this when a group of nations threatened to conquer Judah. The opposing army was vast, and only a miracle could keep Judah safe. Jehoshaphat was learning that the nation needed to turn back to God (2 Chronicles 18-19). So the king declared a fast and led the people in prayer, say-

ing, "LORD . . . we do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you." God then told the nation through a prophet that the battle was the Lord's and he would fight on their behalf.

As we humble ourselves before the Lord, God fights on our behalf in ways that we cannot even fathom. Powerful enemies self-destruct, and oppressive, unjust forces wither away.

When we adopt habits of following Christ, through God's power we can grow, serve, and praise the Lord again.

Father, "our eyes are on you." You rule over all nations and over our hearts. Power and might are in your hands. We cry out to you to rescue and restore us. Amen.

MISSION CHALLENGE

“As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.”

—John 17:18

Jesus prays to the Father, “As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.” We are sent into the world as ambassadors for God’s kingdom. And just as Jesus came to live among us as a human being and to share God’s love, so we are called to come alongside people in their settings and share Christ’s love and good news with them.

In our going “into the world”—whether it’s in our own community, far away, or somewhere in between—we go in the power of God’s name, by which Jesus prays we will be kept safe.

This mission brings restoration to people who are broken, healing to those who are sick, and hope to those without hope. Jesus’ followers help to educate children and adults so that they can be equipped to serve and share Jesus everywhere in this world.

Over the centuries, so many ambassadors of Christ have blessed the world. Christians have shown God’s love by caring for the poor and by advocating for the oppressed. Preachers and translators have helped to bring God’s Word to millions in hundreds of languages. Christian development organizations have helped people work together to grow crops, improve health conditions, and recover from disasters. God’s love has shone in many other ways as well.

Is God’s love showing through you, where you are, today?

Father, thank you for Jesus and his love. May your love flow through us to accomplish your purposes in this world. Amen.

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