

The background of the cover is a photograph of several green apples hanging from a tree branch. The apples are in various stages of ripeness, with some showing a slight yellow tint. The leaves are bright green and detailed. The sky is a clear, bright blue with some light clouds. The text is overlaid on this image.

Sept/Oct 2016

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

**GOD'S
HARVEST
WORK**

ALSO: BECOMING MORE HOLY: THE STORY OF RON

Friends:

I have a pear tree in my yard. I think it's a pear tree because someone told me so. Even after several years, though, I can't be sure, because it has never grown a pear. It has grown tall, and it flowers in the spring—but it produces no fruit. For all I know, since I am not familiar with many tree types, it could be an apple or cherry or some other kind of tree.



The Scriptures tell us that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, kindness, and more (see Galatians 5:22-23). The fruit of the Spirit is God's work in us, through Christ and by his Spirit. When we become believers in Christ, the Spirit works in us to make us more like Christ and less like our old selves. Gradually we begin to bear the fruit of the Spirit, and people can see the results in our lives.

In September, Pastor Keith Mannes helps us understand the work of the Spirit by sharing an extended story about Ron, a friend who became a Christian. I pray that we can all see ourselves in the stories about Ron and his gradual growth as a believer in Christ.

And in October, Pastor Joel Vande Werken continues our meditations on the Spirit's work by considering the Bible's teachings about harvest. May we all bear the fruit of the Spirit as we become part of the harvest of God.

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

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Steven Koster".

—Steven Koster

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**“Becoming More Holy:
The Story of Ron”
Keith Mannes**



**“God’s Harvest Work”
Joel Vande Werken**

Managing Editor: Eleanor Lamsma
Executive Editor: Steven Koster

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ReFrame
Media

september

Becoming More Holy: The Story of Ron

Keith Mannes

Sanctification is a theological word that, in simple and personal terms, means God is making you more and more into what he wants you to be. God is shaping your life and sculpting you, like an artist who works with wood or stone, or like a potter who molds a chunk of clay. It means God has begun a saving, eternal work in your life as if he has planted a seed, and he will tend and nourish that seed to grow and bear fruit. This gracious and powerful action of God is called *sanctification*, which means “becoming more holy.”

To get as practical about this as possible, I’d like to tell you the true story of Ron and some of his friends—all members of a small church we were part of together years ago—in hopes that Ron’s process of sanctification will help us understand our own.

Keith Mannes serves as the pastor of Highland Christian Reformed Church, Marion, Michigan. He and his wife, Alicia, have three children.

HOUSE NUMBER 6

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

Though it's been more than twenty years, I'm still not sure who was more scared when Ron opened the door—he or I. I was on my first night of going door-to-door, working through the neighborhood to meet people. Eventually this would take me to 950 homes, but Ron's house was number six. First night, sixth house. I was pretty nervous.

My goal was to do a brief survey and leave. But Ron—silver-haired, five-foot-seven, overweight, professionally dressed, squinting a little and blinking a lot—well, he kept asking questions. Twenty minutes into the discussion I finally said, “Hey, this may sound a little forward, but—would you ever want to meet for coffee or something, to talk more about faith?”

Ron said, “Well, I think we *have* to do that, because for the past

year I've been praying for God to send someone to me to lead me out of this dark time in my life.” It's a little overwhelming to be called the answer to someone's prayer.

The apostle Peter tells us that sanctification is not something we make happen; it is something we are chosen for, by God. God sees us, targets us, and takes action within us. It is his eternal work.

God was calling Ron. God is calling you too. Are you going to open the door?

Lord, this gives me hope that my life is in your hands. Please do your gracious work in me, and lead me out from darkness today. Amen.

SANCTIFICATION IS A GIFT

"Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink."

—John 7:37

I met Ron while going door to door as a church planter, meeting people who lived in the area. Ron was wealthy. He had a luxury car, a big house, and a screened-in pool with a little waterfall.

Truth is, in the back of my mind, I thought that if God gave us a few generous people like Ron, our church would survive and grow. Then I could even get a paycheck. And Ron did help. Ron was generous and helpful in many ways.

Now, you may be thinking, "See? That's how preachers are: always after people's money." I will admit this was in the *back* of my mind. But I was in this with Ron for a lot more than money. Money wasn't why I showed up on Ron's doorstep.

Trust this: sanctification is God's free gift. It is not about God

squeezing stuff out of you. It's not about some preacher telling you how to live and then taking your money. It's about God giving you eternal life. And he does this like a surgeon, digging around in your twisted, broken, bleeding life, sorting things out and setting them right. When I stood with Ron on his doorstep, I know God wasn't thinking, "Great! I can get something out of that guy." I'm sure God was thinking, "I love Ron. Ron is miserable, and I am going to heal Ron's soul. I'm going to bless him."

So let's get that straight: sanctification is about God giving to you, not taking from you.

Lord, thank you for sanctification. Please, purely and simply, do this generous work in me. Amen.

SANCTIFICATION IS GENTLE

"I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."
—Matthew 11:29

My friend Ron was miserable; he was inwardly tormented. He explained this to me late one night, by his backyard pool, with the waterfall gently babbling. There, in the darkness, he told me his story:

When he was about 13 years old, Ron started getting into trouble, and he got caught. "So," he said, "my dad starts hitting me. He drags me upstairs to my room and throws me to the floor. I'm lying there, bleeding. Then he takes a Bible, slaps it into my chest, and tells me I need to memorize the Bible so I will stop sinning. Then he leaves, slamming the door."

Neither Ron nor I spoke for quite a while, as the pool's little waterfall gurgled like a fountain. Jesus, God, the Bible—and fists. A bleeding boy on the floor, trying to memorize the Bible so he won't get hit again.

Now, let's get this straight: No one can beat sanctification into you. Preachers cannot shout it into you. No one can frighten someone into it. You cannot force it onto someone else. It is God's work—and God's alone. It is good, and it is done with gentleness.

In giving us the image of a yoke (usually used with a pair of oxen for pulling), Jesus shows us the truth of his lordship. This is his gift of gently guiding us into a life of peace, love, and joy. As hard as that may be to accomplish, we need to disregard anyone who has tried to beat religion into us.

Lord, come to me and lead me. I really want your true and gentle lordship. Bless me, and heal my wounds. In your name I pray. Amen.

HOW YOU THINK OF GOD

Fire came out from the LORD and consumed the 250 men.

—Numbers 16:35

My friend Ron had a rough relationship with his father. I met Ron's dad only once, and to me he didn't seem to be a fire-breathing monster.

Still, at some point Ron's dad had embraced the idea that *God* is a fire-breathing monster—maybe based on some Bible readings about judgment. In the Bible there are lots of pictures of God. There are places where God ordains judgment on sin, and where God's prophets bring dire warnings.

Here, in Numbers 16, I get it, down in my soul: rebelling against God is a sin. There is nothing easy or cheap or casual about following and living for God, and yet this God also sent his Son, Jesus, to take on himself the punishment for our sin.

So because of Jesus, the image that now guides our faith is that,

in some way beyond understanding, he absorbed all of the judgment for sin into himself. What Jesus gives us instead, by simple faith, is himself as a shepherd, leading and guiding us. With childlike faith, the main thing we should notice about God is his unfailing love.

Ron's dad never understood that. Neither did Ron. But God so loves us that he took the judgment for sin on himself, through Jesus, his Son. It can be hard to understand such love, but that's God. Sanctification happens, through this love, when we walk with Jesus through all kinds of circumstances.

Lord, please place and grow your love within me, through Jesus. Please make this love flow from me to others too. Amen.

RON THE HULK

"A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart."
—Luke 6:45

One hot day my friend Ron invited our family over to swim in his pool. Our kids loved Ron, and he started gently throwing them in. Big splash, big fun. My kids were calling out, "Again! Do it again!"

Suddenly something went haywire. Ron started throwing the kids harder and farther. He began bellowing like an "incredible Hulk," throwing patio furniture into the pool. He was totally sober, but some kind of "wild" trigger clicked inside, and he was out of control. He was laughing, but there was a scary, fierce intensity about him. As quickly as possible, I got my kids out of the water and tried to calm Ron down.

What was that? One theory: everybody has Hulk-triggers. Like Ron, we may be well-intentioned and act civilly most of the time. But in a flash, our

wild side can erupt—opening the way for dangerous behavior that can spring from selfishness, meanness, anger, lust, and more. Even nice, sweet church people can "hit the wall" and turn wild and dangerous to themselves and others.

Considering that we all have a wild side in us somewhere, it's a miracle that the Holy Spirit is storing good within us, deep down.

So let's not reduce Christianity to the idea that Jesus died to make us "nicer," or that sanctification is about being well-behaved. Jesus came to take us from death to life, transform us, and apply grace and light to our deepest, darkest selves.

Father, when we feel wildness welling up in us, calm us down and keep us steady. In Jesus, Amen.

SANCTIFICATION'S LONG ROAD

I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.
—Philippians 3:12

My friend Ron had large appetites. Ron tended to overeat and to drink at dangerous levels, and that made him overweight. He also had strong sexual urges.

Ron was also in a “midlife crisis.” The sins of his youth were catching up with him. Ron was divorced, and he was filled with regret about it. He was single and alone. All of his massive intelligence, natural talent, and years of hard work were beginning to seem meaningless.

Ask anybody—loneliness is a desert.

But sanctification would change all that, right? Well, not instantly. Even after reclaiming his faith, Ron struggled with his aching miseries.

A lot of people think, “OK, I’ll go to church, and the music will pump me up. The sermon will recharge me.” So they go

to church for three Sundays, read a few Bible passages, say a prayer, and then wonder, “Well, how come my life hasn’t changed?”

Sanctification happens when Jesus takes hold of you. He starts it. Then he keeps working on you, gradually, as you catch on and begin to press on, side by side with him. It’s not just the result of a few quick spurts of effort; it takes a lifetime of following his lead. Sanctification involves walking with Christ, dying to your old ways, and coming to full life in him. There is nothing quick and easy about it. It may not be quick, but the Spirit is with you.

Father, I can’t do this on my own. Take hold of me, and do this in my heart. Thank you. Amen.

SANCTIFIED—AND CLUELESS

My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent.

—1 Corinthians 4:4

Only now, over 20 years later, do I realize how clueless I was as a young pastor. I didn't really know what I was doing with the little church we were starting. I had been to seminary, had read books, and had been to conferences. I also prayed my heart out and worked very hard. It all made so much sense at the time. Yet, looking back, I would do a lot of things differently today.

In 1 Corinthians 4, Paul is pointing, at least partly, to the mystery of not totally knowing what we are doing. I might know more now than I did, but today I will not get my life and faith 100 percent right. And if I live another ten years, I will look back to this time and realize how much I didn't know, and I'll probably wish I'd had deeper, stronger wisdom.

But God knows exactly what he is doing. He is weaving all of

our “not knowing” together as our story, which is part of his story.

This calls for deep humility and total openness with God, from the heart. It calls for daily confession, repentance, and surrender—asking God for wisdom and direction.

Sanctification requires “a broken and contrite heart” (Psalm 51:17). That's what I have strived for—to seek God and wrestle with God, all in a humble and honest way.

Are you doing that too?

Lord, I rest in the knowledge that you see me and know me, and that you accept my imperfect efforts! Thank you for your mercies, and lead me on, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

SANCTIFICATION STARTS WITH GRACE

“The LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you.”

—Numbers 6:25

One thing I knew with total assurance, as a young pastor, was that my friend Ron and I both needed grace. In fact, grace is what we all need most.

Simply put, grace is *unmerited favor*. God loves you and blesses you, even though you don't deserve it. That's grace. Jesus gave up his own life to pay the price of your sin. That's grace. Every day God reaches into his unlimited supply of goodness and love and pours it out on you. God shines his love on you. His light replaces your darkness and sin, filling you with his spirit of righteousness.

When you read the blessing in today's verse, you can almost feel God smiling down on you. This is what Jesus accomplished for you. And when you believe and trust that you can have new life, full and free, because of Jesus' finished work, that is

faith—another wonderful gift, by God's grace.

Every day, Ron woke up, got dressed, and drove off in his Lexus to work—to prove himself to the world. For many years, he spent his whole existence working for love, trying to do things to get his dad to love him, and trying to get the world to approve of him.

While there are a lot of Christian books, curricula, plans, “to-do lists,” and systems to help people like Ron (and the rest of us) enter the process of sanctification, the thing we need most is grace. God's grace. Do you see that as your greatest need too?

Lord, let me feel you smiling down on me. Once again I accept your gift of grace with a believing heart. In Jesus, Amen.

GOD GETS INTO RON'S HEAD

Even at night my heart instructs me.

—Psalm 16:7

As a young pastor, I would sometimes go over to my friend Ron's house, and we'd sit on the back patio by his pool, with questions pouring out of us like the little waterfall connected to the pool. Questions about Jesus, life, sin, church, the Bible, and doctrine. I wish I could say I had great and profound answers. Mostly we just dared to open our hearts and talk. And God blessed our conversations.

So there we were, talking about God, and Ron could be just Ron. He wasn't someone trying to impress people at work. We were just two friends thinking and talking.

Sanctification happens through your heart and your mind. God responds to your concentration. Once Ron had begun to trust God's grace, he just naturally started searching it out and talking about it—kicking ideas

around in his head. He had lots of ideas and lots of questions. When people do that, God's Spirit can connect with them in powerful, moving ways!

Sure, life can still hurt. Struggles, doubts, and fears still abound. But when you trust grace and dig down deep with God, you'll find he is there with you. He will get into your head. He will help you get things straightened out.

I am a pastor, and I totally believe in church. But in addition to that we all need a quiet, peaceful, trusted place to think and talk about God.

When I am full of questions, Lord, come to me with your words, ideas, and thoughts. Lead me, guide me, bless me. In Jesus, Amen.

RON NEEDED JOY

So I hated life All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.
—Ecclesiastes 2:17

Ecclesiastes can be tricky to interpret well, but God has used it to speak brutal truth: Life without God has no joy.

My friend Ron once behaved wildly at his pool, out of control. It scared me a little. I think that, for Ron, some simple, childlike fun just “blew his circuits.” Joy was sorely lacking in Ron’s life—not because he was such a sinner, or because he worshiped wealth. He was just so serious as a businessman and so bored with his life.

Every day Ron worked long hours in a grueling industry. Then he drove into his very clean garage, made dinner, and drank wine, all alone. He was beginning, like the writer of Ecclesiastes, to hate life. Playing with my kids that day at his pool—well, it had been many years since Ron had had so much fun without drinking.

Ironically, I didn’t know much about joy then either. I was a repressed, super-conservative, book-knowledge Christian. Everything I said in our talks was serious, heavy-gravity Bible teaching from my theological heritage.

So there we often were, two guys sitting in the dark, knowing almost nothing about the joy of God, talking about theology. I suspect even God was bored with us. Maybe it’s to people like us that Jesus said, “Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Luke 18:17). Do you have the simple trust and joy of a child in your relationship with God?

Lord Jesus, help us to experience the true joy of knowing you, and of growing in you. Amen.

A SANCTIFIED MESS: PEOPLE

About three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship

—Acts 2:41-42

After I had knocked on 950 doors, introducing myself and Jesus to neighbors in the hope of starting a church, 15 people came to a meeting at our home. Dick was there, a retired navy man, his throat and voice damaged from cancer. Some others were Don, a curiously intelligent real estate man; sweet-spirited, artistic Angie; gentle, hard-working Tim; Dean and Erica, a young couple with three kids; and Andy, a fun-loving chef and guitar player. These people were looking at each other with all the polite enthusiasm of strangers in a dentist's waiting room. My friend Ron was there too—and if this was like a group in a waiting room, he looked like he was scheduled for a root canal.

All of these people became Ron's new friends. They also messed up his well-ordered

world. In this way Ron met with a joyfully unhinging side of sanctification: church. Christians need a church community in order to grow spiritually.

Pentecost was messy too. In one day 3,000 people came to faith in Christ, and then they got involved in each others' lives. Before long, people had expectations and made mistakes. Some wanted special attention, and critics made trouble (see Acts 5-6). Nonetheless, God was there, guiding the whole sanctified mess to enjoy new life in him.

Lord, thank you for gathering us, and help us to find you here too; grant me joy with the other forgiven sinners who worship with me. Amen.

BEGINNING TO TRUST

"Today salvation has come to this house. . . ."

—Luke 19:9

As we started our little church over 20 years ago, a group of strangers began to color each other's lives. Among them was my friend Ron, and for him it was like being splashed with color from buckets of paint.

Ron somewhat nervously opened his home for a men's Bible study on Monday nights. Uptight as he was, he put out a little food at first. But then he started cooking steaks on his huge backyard grill.

Ron became generous with his "stuff." He began to trust people, and in the process he became more open with his material possessions—not because anyone asked him to, but because he wanted to.

Many of us think, "Oh yeah, *giving*. Sure . . ." We set up a little calculator in our brains, and while God listens to all that

earnest clicking going on in our heads, we finally make a calculation and let a little money leak out. But it's a hard thing to do.

But Ron was just open. "Here, have some chips." "Hey, try this steak." He had never done anything like this before: giving things away *just for the joy of it*. Ron's place was kind of like Zacchaeus's house must have been when Jesus came to visit.

Then, after we had eaten, we all talked about the stuff of life. We'd get into some very deep discussions. Eventually Andy would say something crazy, and we'd laugh. It was good to be together—with each other, and with God.

Lord, I want to discover the joy of giving. Here's my life, and my stuff; help me to serve you well—and with joy. Amen.

BODY SLAM

Then she told him this story. . . .

—Genesis 39:17

As our new church began to take shape, Dick (a salty ex-navy guy) and Ron (a businessman) were appointed as elders of our small congregation. And every Monday our men's group met at Ron's house.

You're probably thinking, "Yea! Look at Ron! He's making giant steps in following Christ! So now life is great, right?"

Well, sort of. Because there was a woman at Ron's work who was using the office photocopier to make pictures of herself, and she was leaving them on Ron's desk. Ron was sorely tempted sometimes to accept her offer of sin. Also, around the same time, some kids in Ron's neighborhood made some false accusations about Ron, and the neighbors believed the lies and hassled Ron a lot.

In some ways like Joseph, Ron was getting slammed. Joseph lived with integrity, but he got body-slammed by lies. Was it Satan? Was it God? Why did Joseph have to suffer that way? (In Genesis 40 Joseph also gets slammed again.)

This is how it often goes with sanctification. When it seems that your spiritual life is improving, you can't help expecting that God will bless and reward you. But instead things go wrong. So it was with Ron.

But Ron did not quit walking with God. Though he was angry and hurt, he kept on. This is what a sanctified Christian must do: Trust God, stay true, and keep on.

Lord, the path I walk is often steep and rough. Please walk with me and help me. In Jesus, Amen.

EMBEDDED

Flee from sexual immorality.

—1 Corinthians 6:18

Just as storms churn up old, submerged items from the ocean floor, temptations from a woman at work were dredging up long-buried issues for my friend Ron.

Ron was divorced, but long ago he and his wife had given themselves over to some degrading sins. Now, at work, a woman's advances were causing Ron emotional flashbacks. Some sins bury themselves deep within you.

It's like taking an alluring piece of cake and pouring a bunch of salt on it. Those grains are *in there*. It won't help to try to wipe or wash the salt away. The cake will never be the same.

Sin spoils all kinds of good things in life. And even though Christ's blood cleanses us and we can enjoy the forgiving grace of God here and now,

some of the effects of sin are still embedded in our memory and emotions. They are "in there," and sin can be hard to resist. It's as if our own flesh is attacking us (Romans 7:23; Galatians 5:17). This is a very important reason why Paul tells us to "flee" from sin.

I often think that the fact that Ron resisted those temptations at work showed amazing spiritual heroism. Sanctified people do brave and heroic things sometimes—things that would be impossible without God's grace and help. It's never easy, but the Spirit gives us strength.

Father, I live in the hope of your transforming power. Give me strength to flee from sin. Thank you, in Jesus' name. Amen.

FAILURE IN THE POND

In the following directives I have no praise for you. . . .

—1 Corinthians 11:17

Heroic as he was, there were times when my friend Ron slipped and fell. One Christmas Eve, he and Andy got drunk.

Months earlier, Andy had come to one of our church events slouching, reluctant, and angry. But when he walked in, as he put it, “God just wrapped me in a big ball of cotton.” He was changed by the transforming power of God. Andy became our big, comic, teddy bear.

At Christmastime, Ron was lonely, and since he and Andy had become good friends, Ron invited Andy to stop by on Christmas Eve. “Well,” Ron said, “I opened a bottle of wine. . . .”—and then at some point in the early hours of Christmas morning Ron and Andy were standing knee-deep in a rural neighborhood pond, shooting off a pistol into the night sky. Later,

Ron was horrified with himself. Andy was deeply ashamed.

Sanctification isn’t a once-and-done deal. It can have moments of shocking failure, times when we stumble and fall—just as people did in the church at Corinth. Rich people were taking the best food for themselves and leaving only scraps for the poorer members. They were also drinking much more than a thimble-sized cup of wine for communion.

Yet Paul still called them “brothers and sisters.” A sanctified Christian knows that no matter how bad sin is, God isn’t going to quit on you. His forgiving grace is always there.

Lord, I’m sorry. Please forgive me. Help me to keep trusting in your faithful love. Thank you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

THE SUPER-PERSONAL TALK

The God of all grace . . . will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.
—1 Peter 5:10

Peter knew what being restored was all about. Peter had failed miserably, denying his connection with Jesus (John 18:15-27), and Jesus had restored him (John 21:15-19). But even after being restored, Peter still totally messed up sometimes. For example, Paul once had to correct him (Galatians 2:11-14). Peter learned that you have to be humble enough to listen.

One night my friend Ron told me that the guys at his Bible study were starting to talk more openly about personal struggles. That got me thinking. So I preached a sermon on the topic. I gave the recording to Ron, and at their next meeting the guys gathered around Ron's table and listened to it.

I'm not saying it was a great sermon. All I'm saying is that they cared enough to listen. Ron told me that at first it was a little awk-

ward. But everybody listened, and when it was done, they talked some more. They benefited from the biblical teaching.

Who does this? Who opens their mind and heart, seeking God? It takes courage to talk about your deepest struggles. It takes gutsy humility to be honest with other people and to really search out what God wants from us. But humility like that can open us to God's restoring, sanctifying power.

Is there someone in your life who holds you accountable? Do you have the humility to seek after God with others?

Lord, you know all of my sins and secrets. Restore me, please, and show me someone I can trust to help me through the rough spots. Amen.

LUMPY, BUT PRECIOUS

We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God. . . .
—2 Corinthians 4:7

In our small church we grew to appreciate and care for one another. Ron and Andy became good friends, and many of us learned that if you confided in Andy, or admitted some fear or dark truth, he would give you complete, authentic compassion; you could *feel* it.

Andy was a musician, and he wrote songs for the church that were simple and sweet.

One day at his house Andy showed me his favorite guitar—an original Martin. It was beautiful but, I thought, a little lumpy—it didn't have nice, clean edges. Andy asked if I wanted to play it, and he handed it to me. I strummed a few chords and asked, "What's an original Martin worth?" Andy said, like it was no big deal, "Well, that one is a little over \$14,000." My fingers froze as the weight of its value hit me.

In a way, this is how we are in the hands of God—lumpy, but precious. We are like slightly crude jars of clay, and even though we are imperfect, the Lord can do amazing work in and through us. We are forgiven sinners, precious to God—and useful to him!

It's good to try hard and to seek after righteousness. Yet we are not called sanctified because we are so righteous and holy, but because God has taken us into his hands and filled us with his Spirit of love. Though we are flawed, in his hands we are oh, so precious!

Make me useful in your hands, Father. I am yearning for eternal things, and I long to reflect your glory in the way I live. I know that this is from you, not me, and I'm asking in Jesus' name. Amen.

THE WEIGHT OF LOVE

*He said to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother."
—John 19:26-27*

Sometimes the value of something can *weigh* on you—like when Andy let me play his \$14,000 guitar.

As Ron, another member of our small church, was gradually growing in God's grace and love, one sign of his sanctification was that he started to feel the weight of love for others. It was probably through Andy that Ron gradually became more open to others. And one day, suddenly, he could see how precious everyone is to God. That value *weighed* on Ron, and he grew to care much more deeply and heavily for others.

At the cross, Jesus took two unrelated people and gently but firmly placed the burdens of love on them. Jesus' mother, Mary, and the apostle John became forever entwined in love and care for each other. God

also does that with us. And the apostle Peter urges, "Love one another deeply, from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22).

You have people in your life who are precious to God. Your family, your coworkers, and your neighbors—do you feel the weight of love and concern for them? Are you concerned about their spiritual well-being? There comes a point when a Christian ought to feel this way. It is God's intention and Christ's command. It is the natural flow of a heart touched by salvation, and it is the fruit of sanctification.

Lord, my heart needs to soften. I need your love to make me love. Break through my shell and teach me to love others, as you have loved me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

All God's people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household.
—Philippians 4:22

Ron, a successful businessman, never invited any of his other friends to our church. I'm pretty sure we would have embarrassed him. Of all of us, Ron was the most sophisticated. But he loved being at Andy's house and getting his face sticky with chicken wings. And he connected well with other church friends. But maybe his high-class friends in the business world would not have understood. Maybe Ron just didn't know how to stretch his faith across two different worlds.

That kind of tension is normal for a Christian. In the early church too, social worlds collided. In today's verses, we see that Christ called people from different levels of wealth and freedom into the church. Though we can't be certain, the Christians in Caesar's household were likely more rich and

influential, or at least had better living conditions, than many other Christians in those days.

As a Christian, you have to navigate the various social networks of your life. That can be difficult and challenging. Our friend Andy's wife, for example, would never come to church with him, and over time we learned that his faith was just one more thing she despised about him.

I know that Ron carried his faith with him to work. He just lived it differently with us than he did with his other people. That's normal. It takes time to figure it all out.

I know I need to share my faith, Lord. Please go ahead of me, show me opportunities, and give me words to say. Amen.

NEW? SERIOUSLY?

If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!
—2 Corinthians 5:17

The life of a Christian isn't without pitfalls. My friends Ron and Andy got drunk at Christmas, and they felt ashamed and repentant. Sin still seemed strong. Not long after that, Ron and I sat by the fountain at his pool, and he was leaning forward, his voice tight: "It says, 'the new is here,' but I just don't feel very different, most days, from how I used to be."

Can you relate? I can. What's the point, anyway? If I believe in Jesus and I read the Bible and pray, then shouldn't I be "newer looking" than I seem? Shouldn't we all? Just look at all the sins in the church. It's pretty crushing.

Paul is emphatic when he says, "The old has gone, the new is here!" In other places Paul teaches that with Christ in us, we are no longer just dead flesh (Romans 8:10-11; Galatians 2:20). What would seem to

us the smallest touch of Christ in us (like the mustard seed in Matthew 13:31-32) has made the beginnings of eternal life to grow. God has ordained that his eternal treasure be housed in your toxic, tempted, hormone-driven, hot-blooded flesh. And Paul tells us, "Therefore we do not lose heart" (2 Corinthians 4:16).

I shared this with Ron, as best I could. But I could tell it didn't help him feel much better. Sin can be powerfully depressing.

And yet "the new is here!" We have cause to rejoice, even when we don't feel it.

Lord, I want to be a better person for you. Please encourage me today; it would help to see some progress. Please grow your life in me. Amen.

GRUMPY RON

All of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil. . . .

—1 Peter 3:8-9

My friend Ron faithfully attended our small church, but he didn't like our worship services much. Maybe it was that we met in a rented building. It didn't feel like, you know, a *church*. Maybe it was our style—just acoustic guitar and a sermon. And maybe my sermons weren't so great. If that was the case, he was too kind to say.

All I know is that sometimes Ron came to our gatherings looking a bit ruffled, passive, and a little grumpy. And he didn't always agree with our programming, like when we hosted a 5K fund-raising run for an AIDS clinic. Also, Ron didn't like fellow member Dick the navy guy very much. He didn't hate him, but there was a bit of a personality clash.

My point is that church can sometimes be challenging. This is another sign of sanctification:

giving up control. "Value others above yourselves" (Philippians 2:3). "Bear with each other and forgive one another" (Colossians 3:13). These are big themes in the Bible.

Every pastor I know can tell stories about church members who are controlling, bitter, bent on misery—and who make everyone else miserable too. Please don't be such a person.

It says a lot about Ron's faith that he stayed with us. He served and put up with us, even if at times he was a bit grumpy. The Spirit was at work in him. Is the Spirit working in you?

Lord, sometimes I feel grumpy. I need your help today to put a smile on my face and warmth in my heart. In Jesus, Amen.

CIRCLE OF LIGHT

As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.
—James 2:26

God started sending homeless travelers and misfits of all kinds to the small church we had started. One of those people was Dwayne.

Dwayne was tall, with swept-back silver hair, a black-leather vest, and cowboy boots. He was a soft-spoken, gentle, and wise believer. Sometimes, however, his alcoholism would attack like a shark and take him in its jaws to the depths. Nonetheless, my friend Ron welcomed Dwayne into his home with us.

One night Dwayne's shark came, with the result that he got beat up in a bar. I found him passed out in a cheap hotel, with his face bludgeoned and vomit all over his shirt. I called church member Dick, and Dick called Ron, and they called Andy, and then they called me back, with instructions: "After you're done, come to Ron's." So

I let the air out of all the tires on Dwayne's car so he couldn't go anywhere, and I left.

It was late at night when I drove into Ron's driveway. But I could see, through the front window, that all the guys were there, huddled under a light at Ron's table. They were making phone calls, trying to find a treatment facility. Ron said he'd pay, and the other guys said they'd help.

I remember them sitting in that glowing circle of light. Sanctification means that you do Jesus-like things in the world.

Lord, the needs of people overwhelm me. Show me which ones to get involved with. Help me to help you serve them with your love, please. Amen.

GOD'S VAST PROJECT

You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly.
—Hebrews 12:22

In October of 1997, Ron, Andy, Dick, Tim—all members of our small church—traveled with me to Washington, D.C., for a Christian men's rally at the capitol. There 1.4 million Christian men prayed, sang, kneeled, stood, and listened to sermons.

I remember Ron, wearing jeans and a sweatshirt, reclining on the grass, his face to the sun. He was happy. For the first time in his life Ron glimpsed the vast entity known in the Apostles' Creed as "the communion of saints." All he had to do was turn his head to see Christians spread across the Washington mall in every direction.

Prior to this, Ron's Christian experience included just himself and a few people around him. Christianity must have seemed a small project. All he had ever known of God was the church

of his childhood, where he got screamed at on Sundays—or had the Bible jammed into his chest. Or, later, with our little church, gatherings in odd rented facilities.

We tend to do our faith-thing with Jesus on small terms. You might even be thinking your sanctification is mainly about *you*. We often forget that this is the kingdom of God, and that each of us is a part of the body of Christ, that magnificent work of God by which he is reclaiming the world.

Where do you see God working today?

Lord, as you cleanse my soul, enlarge my vision. Help me to see you working in my life and in others' lives. I cannot thank you enough! Amen.

ANDY AND HEAVEN

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you. . . .

—1 Peter 4:12

Our fellow church member Andy had brain cancer. Ron and Andy had become Christian friends, and this illness knocked Ron off his feet.

This was Andy: About a year after I was called to serve another church far away, Andy and his friend Dick came to visit. Andy had heard there was good fishing in the local streams, so we went fishing. My plan was to fish from the shore, but Andy looked at me with joyful abandon and walked fully clothed into the river, splashing upstream like a child.

Andy also had a guitar collection. That weekend he played one of them for the church I was now serving. Afterward he handed it to me and asked me to care for it till the next time he came, even though we both knew there wouldn't be a "next time."

Four months later, I was on a plane to do Andy's funeral. He hadn't died alone; Dick had gone to visit him every day to care for him.

Ron picked me up at the airport and dissolved in tears. He drove me to his house, which had now become their headquarters of love and grief. The remains of our small church was gathered in his living room.

There we all learned about suffering. And it was worthwhile, because it was suffused with joy, love, and Christ. There is no choosing: it all comes in one package.

Lord, walk with us through times of suffering. We do not want to go through those times without you. Christ, meet us in these times of need. In your name, Amen.

TWO MORE PLANE TICKETS

“Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

—Acts 20:32

My friend Ron had had a rough relationship with his dad. I met Ron’s dad just once. It was at Ron’s funeral.

The information about Ron’s death is sketchy. A witness saw Ron’s Lexus plow into the back of a truck at high speed on the highway. No one else was hurt. That’s all I know. So I flew back to attend his funeral.

Two years later I bought another plane ticket, because Dick, another member of our small church, died too, of old age and natural causes. I was able to take part in his service.

I marvel when I think how much these men cared for each other, because less than ten years earlier none of them had known the others existed. And they weren’t coworkers in an office, or players on a sports team. The reason and cause of

their bond was Christ. Honestly, nothing else was accomplished except the living, eternal work of God in their souls through the love of Christ.

I can testify that sanctified people make you emotionally and spiritually rich. These men had their faults and often stumbled in their Christian walk—and that might make some people want to give up on them. But it works better to risk your heart and to cherish each person with God’s love. This is how God made sanctification to be.

Lord, thank you for the Christians around me. You have made me rich through them, and you have blessed me. Thank you for these gifts. Amen.

THE GREATEST THING

One thing I ask from the LORD . . . that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life. . . .
—Psalm 27:4

My friend Ron died in a car accident, but it's not clear how the accident happened. Maybe the car's accelerator was stuck. Maybe Ron had a stroke or a heart attack and couldn't control the car.

In any case, it must settle upon us that sanctification is the most important process in life. Giving your life to God, seeking God and his purposes, and offering yourself in worship and obedience to God, just as in Psalm 27—well, this is *urgent*. There is nothing more powerful and majestic and essential than becoming a Christian—and getting better at living it (with God's help) from the inside out.

This is not a fear thing. You may have heard preachers say, "Turn, or burn! Believe in Jesus, or you will go to hell." Well, I believe in hell, but the main reason to believe in Jesus is that he loves

us so much that he made it possible for us to have full life with him forever.

Believing in Jesus is a *desire* thing. It involves the desire to know God and to get your hands into whatever he's doing (Philippians 1:9-11). All of our conversations and the stuff we did in our little church community—like trying to help Dwayne and lots of other lost and needy people—these are the things of Christ, and they are eternal.

Do you have something like that going in your life? Devote your life to Christ. There is no greater thing.

Right now, Lord, redirect me. Take me into your kingdom. This is the hunger of my soul. Hear me, please. In Jesus, Amen.

HOW FAR GRACE GOES

*To those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people
... Grace and peace to you. ...* —1 Corinthians 1:2-3

We're not sure what happened when my friend Ron died in a car crash. Did the car malfunction? Did Ron have a stroke or a heart attack? We don't know. It could also be that Ron was drunk or on drugs or even that he crashed on purpose.

If so, it would mean that Ron had sunk into misery again. It would mean that after our small group of believers there stopped meeting, and after his friend Andy died, Ron fell back into old patterns of despair and old methods of coping.

You might say, "Well, if so, then Ron went to hell." Other people might conclude that sanctification is a cruel pipe dream. If sanctification is just a matter of trying and trying but continuing to fail, then what's the point?

But no! Don't buy any of that. Get rid of those thoughts.

Sanctification in and through Christ is God's work, by God's power, according to God's vision. We *are* treasures in God's eyes, even in our worst moments. A gold mine is mostly mud, but the treasure is there. And God doesn't forsake his people, in spite of the mud.

Read the whole book of 1 Corinthians, and notice all the mud. Yet Paul calls the people sanctified brothers and sisters.

This is how God sees it. And this is how God saw it at the moment of Ron's death, no matter the circumstances. In Christ, nothing separates us from the love of God.

Faithful God, according to your love, remember me. Today again I rest in your hands. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

PRECIOUS IN GOD'S SIGHT

Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful servants.
—Psalm 116:15

I participated in my friend Ron's funeral. There we were, at a funeral home, surrounded by the businesspeople of Ron's career world.

There were young men in flashy suits who looked like they were eager to be somewhere else. There were also older, heavier men, many of whom had a body shape like Ron's and who bore the same weariness in their faces. Ron's dad and mom were there too.

I don't remember what I said about Ron that day. Nor do I remember what I said about Jesus. But I do remember feeling that to a lot of people Jesus doesn't make sense.

Also, no one seemed to care about who Ron was *as a Christian*. The money he made for the company was nice, and he was a decent enough guy,

but no one really cared about anything else in Ron's life. If he was into some religious thing, that was fine but unimportant.

There are various interpretations of Psalm 116:15. The one I cherish is that God attends to us when we die. God cares about the life we have lived. God sees us as we really are, and he sees us as his own.

That's the comfort you can have if you're a Christian. Jesus loves you, and he deeply cares about you—in life and in death.

Jesus, I love it that you know me, that you see me as I am, and that you have begun your work in me. Please make your love flow through me, so that people can feel your grace. In your name, Amen.

WORTHWHILE

I say of the holy people who are in the land, "They are the noble ones in whom is all my delight."
—Psalm 16:3

I remember a warm Sunday morning back in the days when our small church began. The sun was bright, and lines of light reflecting from Ron's swimming pool flashed against the walls of his house. As always, the little hot-tub fountain near the pool was babbling. People came, bringing gifts. Everyone was helping out. Dick was moving around, croaking a welcome with his cancer-ravaged voice. Andy and Tim were working so hard on the food preparations that they were sweating. Angie sat off to the side, quietly aglow and taking it all in. Ron was moving around too, professional and courteous. He must have been wondering how all this had happened to him—because on that day we were using his pool to baptize people.

Honestly, I don't remember who we baptized that day. Nor

do I remember the names of all the homeless people who had wandered into our midst.

But I do recall that one evening after that baptism Sunday, while Ron and I sat out by his pool, he said that all of this—including his faith, and the people of the church—had given him the most peace his soul had ever known.

Sanctification is a wild ride, but it is worthwhile. What can I do but praise God that Ron answered the door when I called on him so many years ago?

Father, I need peace in my mind and soul. Help me to follow you each day. Transform my worries and troubles into trust, joy, and peace. Amen.

SIGNATURE

In him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.
—Ephesians 2:22

I have a wooden cross hanging on my office wall. As with anything our friend Andy made, it is simple—just two-by-fours into which he carved swirls with a chisel. On the day we moved away to work in another church, all the people from our little church signed their names on this cross. So there also, in black marker, is “Ron.”

I cannot help wondering if *your* name is on a cross somewhere. I mean, have you signed up? Have you applied your life to the eternal project of Christ? Scripture says that Christ died for you and gives his Spirit to you. Sanctification is Christ taking you in his hands and forming you, etching himself into you. There is no better way to live. God offers his heavenward power to you too.

You can sign up. All it takes is a prayer, accepting God’s gift

of forgiveness and peace with simple, childlike trust and belief. Then—even if you’re scared or reluctant—find a trustworthy church. Be baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then rise up, in the love of God, and live. Do for other people what these members of our small church did for each other: what Ron did for Dwayne, or what Dick did for Andy. Or what that whole little church did for me.

My prayer is that you become a follower of Jesus Christ (if you are not one already), because this is the stuff of eternal life.

Father, I come to you in faith. Take me into the flow of eternal life, by your Spirit. Forgiveness, peace, purpose, and love—I am asking for it all. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

october

God's Harvest Work

Joel Vande Werken

In North America, October is a time of harvest. Grain that has been growing all summer is ready to be brought in from the fields. Fruit can be picked from orchards and vineyards. Garden produce is ready for storage for the winter ahead.

The Bible often pictures God's work in our lives as harvesting. Through the Holy Spirit, God prepares our hearts to grow in the knowledge and love of Christ and to bear fruit for his increasing kingdom. And one day God will bring this harvest in, gathering his people from the fields of life. Let's explore God's harvest work together this month.

Joel Vande Werken has served as a pastor in northern New Jersey since 2007. Though he has never lived on a farm, he married a farmer's daughter and has been privileged to serve as the pastor of a number of farmers. He and his wife, Brandie, have four young children who, between them, own a number of toy tractors.

CELEBRATING HARVEST

The land yields its harvest; God, our God, blesses us.

—Psalm 67:6

For most of the past decade, I have served as the pastor of a church in a rural area. Each fall, the fields bustle with activity as farmers bring in crops that have been growing all summer. The air is filled with energy and excitement as the fruits of the year's labors are gathered in.

Harvest reminds us of God's faithfulness. God's blessing sustains our crops with the sunshine, rainfall, and soil nutrients needed to help them grow. Harvest reminds us that in this year God has again been gracious and has given us a blessing as the crops are gathered in. Especially when we think about people in our world who go hungry, this season should bring us to humble thanks before God and to renewed concern for the needs of our world.

Yet the Bible also uses harvest imagery to picture God's work

of renewing sinners by grace, and of gathering them together to be his people in Christ. Even as it speaks of the blessing of God's provision, Psalm 67 highlights a mission impulse as well: "May the peoples praise you, God; may all the peoples praise you." God pours out his blessings "so that all the ends of the earth will fear him."

As you think about the blessing of another harvest, join in praying that the whole earth will recognize God's faithful care as he gathers his people in Christ.

You have been gracious to us, Lord. Send us a harvest once again, and gather us together with your people in Christ. We join with the whole earth in praising you, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

SO IS MY WORD

"As the rain and the snow . . . [make the earth] bud and flourish . . . so is my word that goes out. . . ."
—Isaiah 55:10-11

Harvest is the conclusion of a long process of growth. In the spring, farmers plant seed in the ground. Over the course of the summer, God provides water and sunlight, causing the seeds to sprout and grow. Then, months later, the crop is mature, and the grain or produce is ripe for gathering.

Harvest is a time of celebration. As long as crops are in the field, they are vulnerable to damage from disease, animals, and harsh weather. But when harvested, the fruits of another year's labors are safe.

The prophet Isaiah compares the work of God's Word in our hearts to the growing season and the harvest. Just as it takes time for a crop to mature, so also it takes time for God's Word to become established in our hearts. Some crops have a long growing season; others

take less time to ripen. But the process of growth continues in each case. When we seek the Lord through his Word, when we turn to Christ in repentance and trust, we begin to see the Spirit's work of bringing faith and hope to maturity in us.

Where is God bringing a harvest of righteousness in your life? Give thanks for the growth you have seen in this season and for the signs of God's Word at work in your life. Also pray for continued spiritual growth and maturity in your and others' lives.

Heavenly Father, send your Word into our hearts. Bring us to maturity. Weed out that which is sinful in us, and bring us joy in the work of your Spirit. Amen.

ALL BY ITSELF

"All by itself the soil produces grain. . . ."

—Mark 4:28

One of the remarkable aspects of plant growth is that we humans do so little to cause it. That fact is both frightening and humbling. Farmers plant seed and tend it throughout the growing season. But they cannot force it to germinate, or protect the crop from every whim of weather, or make a plant bear fruit.

The created world reminds us how much we depend on God for each day's provisions. We can prepare seeds and plant fields for best possible outcomes, but we cannot force a plant to grow or make it bear fruit. Harvest is a gift of God's grace, a gift beyond our control.

Jesus uses the growing seed as a picture of God's kingdom. It is appealing to imagine that spiritual growth is something that can be controlled—that with enough persuasion I could mold

public opinion to address poverty or racial injustice, or work hard enough to eliminate sinful anger or selfish greed from my own life. Jesus reminds me, though, that all growth is a gift. I may tend the seed of God's righteousness in my heart, water it, and try to protect it. But only God can forgive me, restore me, and make me grow.

As you look at crops that have grown this year, remember God's gift of gracious growth in your own life and heart. And as you anticipate the harvest, pray that God is also preparing a harvest of good fruit in you.

Holy Spirit, thank you for growth. Teach us patience as we wait for the gift of Jesus' new life to bear fruit in us. Amen.

TAKING GOD'S CARE FOR GRANTED

"Let us fear the LORD our God, who gives autumn and spring rains in season, who assures us of the regular weeks of harvest."

—Jeremiah 5:24

Little children are full of questions: "Why does the corn grow? How does a seed sprout?" They are filled with wonder at the miracle of creation and of all living things.

But adults often forget the wonders of creation. We take for granted that seeds sprout and plants grow. Agricultural advances shelter many of us from the worst effects of drought, disease, and insects that kill crops. Many city dwellers rarely give a thought to the wonders of harvesting. It's as if food simply appears on grocery store shelves.

Scripture pleads with God's people to remember the source of every blessing, to see his hand of provision in rainfall, in the harvest season, and in the working of creation in general. We are far more dependent on God's grace than we often think. And our failure to ac-

knowledge him is not just ignorance. It is sin.

Sin deprives us of good because it keeps us from seeing God in all his goodness to us. Human relationships suffer when we take them for granted. And when we look at the world without seeing God, we miss out on God's goodness.

Jesus came into this world to help us see again the goodness of the Father. Won't you pray that he helps us to recover our wonder at God's care for us?

Gracious God, we repent of taking your care for granted. Help us not to look at the growing world without seeing you at work. Open our eyes, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

A HARVEST OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

He . . . will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.

—2 Corinthians 9:10

What is God doing here?

This is a question many parents ask as they struggle to meet financial demands and also find time to train their children. It's the question every one of us should be asking in the daily tasks of life.

Paul identifies the outcome of God's growing season for us as "the harvest of [our] righteousness." "Righteousness" does not mean following rules to try to be good; it indicates that because we are credited with Jesus' righteousness, we grow to reflect God's character in all we do. Then we discover spiritual growth in ourselves as we practice a disciplined life.

Paul wrote to encourage the church to give generously to support the poor. Though it's tempting to hold on to what we have, generosity opens our eyes to the rich blessings of God.

Planting requires faith, Paul says. And without faith, there is no planting—and no harvest.

But generosity is only one outcome of the larger task of growth God has for us. Like the harvest of the field, the harvest of righteousness comes only from God. Through the death of Christ, God enables us to be more like Jesus, giving us his righteousness. When we are clothed with Christ (Romans 13:14), what others see is not our goodness but God's perfect righteousness.

"Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" What a beautiful gift that is!

Lord, increase our faith to live faithfully each day. May others give thanks when they see your righteousness in us. Amen.

GOD'S HARVEST TESTIMONY

"[God] has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons. . . ."

—Acts 14:17

Have you ever thought of a stocked grocery shelf as a testimony to God's goodness?

Many of us do not live in rural areas, where we can often see firsthand our dependence on "rain from heaven and crops in their seasons." We grow accustomed to finding our food at the store, and we often take planting, growth, and harvesting for granted.

It is easy to get swept up in the myth of human accomplishment. We think we can buy the happiness of our families by the earnings of our hard work. We imagine we can beat grief with our own stoicism. We think we can get out of trouble by impressing others with our charming personality.

But it doesn't work that way. The apostle Paul admitted that he had once believed he could

earn his own righteousness (see Philippians 3:4-9). And when people thought he was a god as they saw God's power at work in him, he pleaded with them to see that all good things, such as food, health, and healing, are from God alone through the Savior, Jesus.

All of life is a gift of grace. We cannot control the weather. We cannot force growth to occur. We cannot make ourselves righteous. But God's power can do all that. He shows us each day—even through provisions in the grocery store—that he can grow us spiritually.

Father, open our eyes to the testimony of your harvest in us, and fill our hearts with your joy. In Jesus, Amen.

FIRSTFRUITS

Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops.
—Proverbs 3:9

She was a single mother with little time and even less money. She often felt alone, with each new day's to-do list seeming to demand two days of work.

Sometimes a harvest does not come easily. We often read verses like this in Proverbs and imagine them to apply to the seasons when we have plenty, when life is full and barns overflow. Yet a harvest requires hard work. The season demands our full energy and attention.

God asks for firstfruits. He stops us at the beginning of the harvest, in the midst of our busyness, when we have no guarantee of the final result. God calls us to thank him for what he has already provided, to give back the first part of what we've been given, trusting that he will provide for the rest of our harvest.

It's not easy to trust God with firstfruits. Even in harvest time,

lots of dangers can threaten the yield: late season storms, delays due to equipment breakdowns, early frosts, plant-damaging insects. Wouldn't it be better to finish the harvest first, and then worship?

God never promises an easy process. But he does promise that the harvest will be complete. Even when the firstfruits of our work seem underwhelming and the obstacles staggering, God invites us to trust his path for our lives.

What firstfruits can you offer to the Lord today?

Lord, encourage us when we worry that the harvest will be too small. Help us to trust you even with meager beginnings, and bless our efforts. Amen.

BIGGER BARNS?

“What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.”

—Luke 12:17

Some harvests are difficult, but others seem to come easily. Favorable climate and soil conditions can create an unexpected bumper crop for the farmer.

When business is good, when your financial security is growing quickly, do you think of God? Do you remember to thank him for all he has given you? Jesus tells a story about a businessman who had a windfall. It’s worth noting that this man is not portrayed as corrupt or unethical. He is simply someone who’s had a really good year.

The problem is in his attitude: “My crops . . . my barns . . . my surplus grain . . . myself.” The harvest is all about him.

Jesus looks us in the eye and asks, “When does it stop? When you’ve splurged for the latest electronic gadget? When you have a bigger boat? When

you’ve locked in that college scholarship, or saved for twenty years of retirement?” He himself has demonstrated God’s generous grace by offering himself for our sin.

The Christian faith does not say it’s wrong to have desires or to appreciate good things in life (see 1 Timothy 4:4). In Jesus’ story, the farmer’s foolishness comes not from enjoying life but from forgetting God.

Whether we are rich or poor, we must ask whether we are “rich toward God,” living every moment out of gratitude for all that God has given us.

Lord, fill us with your generosity. Help us to see your abundant giving in the blessings we enjoy, and to use those blessings to serve others. Amen.

RESTING DURING HARVEST

“Six days you shall labor, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even during the plowing season and harvest you must rest.”

—Exodus 34:21

When I was in college, I worked for a summer alongside an employee who prided himself in never taking a day off. Every day, he showed up at work, sometimes even for a double shift. For more than two months, he did little but sleep and work.

While not all of us hold to such an extreme schedule, we live in a culture that rarely rests. We praise “the city that never sleeps.” God’s call to a weekly pattern of work and rest can seem hopelessly out of touch with our culture today.

Harvest is a busy time for the farmer. There is a limited time to gather crops while the growing and harvesting conditions offer the best yield. We can appreciate the temptation to work a seven-day week during a busy season. We will rest, we explain

to ourselves, when the harvest is over.

But God makes clear to his people that the command to rest does not adjust to our schedules. Rest is God’s necessary gift to us, one that allows us to see his work rather than being blinded by our own tasks.

The weekly call to rest from our labor reminds us that our relationship with God is a gift, not an accomplishment. Jesus has done all that is needed for our salvation. Can you rest in him this week?

We are busy, Father. We often feel overwhelmed by our busy schedules. Help us to trust you with our time, and to look to Jesus’ finished work in our rest. In his name we pray. Amen.

DON'T GIVE UP!

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. —Galatians 6:9

“No good deed goes unpunished,” complained the man in the next office cubicle. He was frustrated at the lack of gratitude he perceived from fellow employees he had tried to help.

Often in life we reap the effects of poor decisions we have made. But sometimes, even when we have tried to do what is right and help others, life seems unfair. It can look as if carelessness and sinful behavior get rewarded, while kindness goes unnoticed (see Psalm 73).

The apostle Paul assures believers that God does pay attention. To spiritually fatigued Christians in Galatia, Paul offered a vision of the harvest. He pointed them back to the work of the Spirit, sent in Jesus’ name to grow the fruit of righteousness within them (Galatians 5:22). As with crop development, such growth does not occur all at once. But

that does not mean God is not at work around us or in or through us.

When our good works go unnoticed by others, God still sees. And though it can take a long time to weed out the effects of our sinful nature, God gives us an eternal perspective on the Spirit’s work in us. Because Jesus took on the punishment for our failures, we can be sure that God will apply his goodness to us.

Are you weary of trying to do good? Don’t give up. In his time, God will provide a harvest.

Holy Spirit, give us a vision of the fruit of Christ’s work that you are growing in us, so that we may be refreshed in sharing God’s goodness with everyone we meet. Amen.

LEFTOVER SHEAVES

When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it.
—Deuteronomy 24:19

“Never leave money on the table.” This classic advice from business negotiators instructs people to squeeze as much out of every deal as possible, to drive tough bargains and maximize every opportunity.

During the harvest, some sheaves of grain would inevitably fall to the ground. Good business sense would dictate that the harvesters would go back and collect those sheaves.

But that’s not the way things went in ancient Israel. God instructed his people to use the harvest as an opportunity to care for vulnerable members of society: the poor, the foreigner, the orphan, the widow. The gospel changes the way we view our financial resources. God has no problem with businesses turning a profit. But profit is not the believer’s only motive.

“Remember that you were slaves . . . and the LORD your God redeemed you,” God tells his people. Just as God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt, so he rescues us from slavery to sin. Because of Jesus’ work, our worth is not in how much we can grasp, but in the new life provided by our Redeemer.

As a result, we have the privilege of telling others about God’s redeeming work. We use words to tell the story of Jesus’ victory over sin, and we express this in our actions as we care for people around us.

How is God’s redeeming work flowing through you to others?

Lord, in redeeming us, you have put us in a place to care for others. Show us the people who need to know Christ’s care through us. Amen.

JUST IN TIME FOR HARVEST

Naomi returned from Moab . . . arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.
—Ruth 1:22

Around the world today, tens of thousands of people live as refugees, foreigners in a country not their own. They often face a difficult life, cut off from familiar people and places and dependent on others for daily provisions.

Naomi and Ruth were in the land of Israel in search of a new life. As outsiders and widows, they were doubly vulnerable by the standards of the day. The beginning of their story is filled with heartache and sorrow. Having lost husbands and homes, how would they provide for themselves?

But God had arranged to take care of all that. His plan for their lives was being worked out. Though Naomi saw only God's hand of misfortune at this point, the first hopeful note in the book observes that she and Ruth came to Bethlehem at the

start of the barley harvest. This is significant because it recalls that God had arranged to bless vulnerable people through the generosity of farmers who had more than enough.

Naomi and Ruth may not have realized it, but God was at work already to arrange their arrival at just the time when he had provided the resources to show his care for them. And in providing for physical needs, God shows his commitment to save vulnerable sinners through Christ (see Philippians 3:20-21).

How can you use God's resources to show his care to others today?

Loving God, thank you for caring for vulnerable people. As you have compassion on us as sinners, help us to show compassion to others. Amen.

A RICH REWARD

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

Many of us can identify seemingly chance events that change the course of our future. Perhaps an unexpected encounter led you to meet your husband or wife, or a casual comment led you to the career you now have. Maybe a friendship developed because you and a stranger were placed in the same study group, or your faith grew stronger because of a book you picked up or a conversation you just happened to have.

God provides for our needs in many ways. In today's story God uses the provisions of Israelite law (Deuteronomy 24:19-21) and the generosity of a farmer to feed Ruth and Naomi. Boaz treats Ruth as family, though she is at best a distant relative. Through Boaz, God's care for Naomi and Ruth takes on a name and a face.

As God gives a harvest, we have the opportunity to share with people around us. But God does more than provide for physical needs. Through such encounters, God reminds us that Jesus came into our midst as a human being, a "near relative," to save us from sin. He gives rain and sunshine so that we might come to him for all that we need for life *and* godliness (2 Peter 1:3).

When provision comes in surprising ways, remember the great Giver who provides what we need for this life and for eternity.

Gracious Father, not only do you provide for our needs, but you also reveal *yourself* as the provider!

Open our eyes to the ways in which you are at work in Jesus for our salvation.
Amen.

GOD MULTIPLIES THE HARVEST

The women living there said, "Naomi has a son!"

—Ruth 4:17

Sometimes God has a surprising way of accomplishing his plans for us.

Naomi's life had not gone the way she had wanted. With her husband and two sons, she had left Israel in search of a better life. They had left in a season of famine, in search of a place where the harvest would be better. But instead of prosperity, she had suffered further loss (Ruth 1:1-5).

Perhaps you feel today like Naomi did then. Every turn, it seems, presents another dead end. A struggling marriage ends in divorce. Strained relationships are severed. A promising job opportunity falls through. It may seem that the day of harvest will never come.

But God uses gleaning—the process of picking up leftover crops—to multiply a great har-

vest for Naomi. By providential appointment, Ruth marries the man in whose field she gleans. And Naomi, whose family line once seemed dead, now rejoices in the birth of a grandson.

The book of Ruth ends with the further assertion that God would multiply Naomi's family more than she could possibly imagine. Ruth became the great-grandmother of David, God's chosen ruler for Israel (1 Samuel 16:1-13). And David became the ancestor of the ultimate King, Jesus, the eternal Redeemer of God's people.

Who would have known how much God could do to multiply a meager harvest? He can do that in our lives as well.

Father, help us to trust you to do more than we can possibly ask or imagine, in Christ. Amen.

GOOD SOIL

“Other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.”
—Luke 8:8

Good soil makes a huge difference in the amount of harvest a farmer can expect.

Jesus told a story that reflects the farming practices in his time. A farmer would sow by hand, scattering seed in the field as he walked along. Not surprisingly, a portion of the seed fell in places too poor to produce a crop. But some seed, Jesus tells us, sent its roots down deep and produced a hundred-fold harvest—ten times the commonly expected harvest of that day!

This story forces us to look at the condition of our own hearts. While we would like to think of ourselves as good soil, most of us know how the busyness of life, as well as the heartaches and fears we face, can choke and wither and snatch our faith away.

Yet Jesus reassures us with an amazing truth: good soil exists as well. It's almost as if he points us to a patch of such soil amid the rocks and weeds of the world. Jesus' challenge can also be a word of encouragement as we hear and respond to the story of salvation in Christ. In unexpected places, God can produce a bumper crop of righteousness.

May all of our hearts be good soil, ready and willing to respond to God's Word.

“Lord, let my heart be good soil, open to the seed of your Word.” Break through the poor soil of our sinful condition, and allow our hearts to produce a rich harvest for you. Amen.

GOOD FRUIT

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

—Galatians 5:22-23

One important task of a farmer is to watch the crop to make sure it is developing well. Drought, flood, cold, heat, disease—any of these can take a toll on the maturing crop and affect the yield at harvesttime.

In the same way, we are responsible to watch and diagnose the growth and maturity of our souls. And in the Bible God provides for us to do that. The “acts of the flesh,” for example, are symptoms showing that something is not right in our spiritual development. Perhaps we struggle with a deeply rooted sin that makes us vulnerable to attacks of sexual immorality or drunkenness. Or maybe something affects our ability to accept God’s grace, forgiveness, and approval, and our lives are spotted with selfishness or with envy of others.

In contrast, as the Holy Spirit increasingly works in the hearts of those redeemed by Christ, we discover signs of good fruit. Notice that Paul writes of “fruit,” not “fruits.” It’s not that some Christians have a harvest of love, others have joy, and so on. Together, all these marks identify the fruit of God’s righteousness in us.

Ask God’s Spirit to help you examine your spiritual life so that your life in Christ grows, ripens, and matures. And together let’s look ahead to God’s final harvest of our souls.

Shape my heart, Holy Spirit, so that your life becomes fruitful in me. Weed out “the acts of the flesh” that hinder my heart, so that my life may produce an abundant harvest for Christ. Amen.

RIPE FOR HARVEST

“Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.”

—John 4:35

At harvesttime, a farmer's entire focus is on getting the crop in from the fields. Ripe produce will spoil if left in the fields too long. Weather or pests can damage yields. So a careful farmer will work long hours in harvest season to ensure that the entire crop is safely gathered in. No responsible farmer would want to ignore the signs of harvest.

Jesus challenged his followers to be similarly aware of the spiritual harvest around them. Though the Samaritans, traditional rivals of the Jews, might have seemed to be spiritually unproductive, God was doing a great work in them, and many of them became believers.

Perhaps you are discouraged because a family member refuses to listen to the message of Christ. Or you look at the world around you and see a culture hostile to the gospel.

It may seem that people who oppose God are gaining the upper hand. Jesus reminds us that God often does unexpected work right under our noses. Like a hardworking farmer, we must remain diligent and focus on the spiritual harvest God has set before us.

But this hard work does not mean drudgery in Christ's service. Jesus points to the joy of the sower and the reaper to remind us of the excitement of dealing with matters of eternal consequence. In your conversations this week, ask God to show you his intended harvest.

Open my eyes, Lord, so that I can see where you are at work. Prepare me for the work of harvesting what your Spirit has sown, and give me joy in serving you. Amen.

HARVEST WORKERS

“Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”
—Matthew 9:38

During harvest, every available hand is needed to finish the work. Ripe crops should not remain in the field any longer than necessary, lest something spoil them. Diligent workers are needed to gather the harvest as quickly as possible.

Here Jesus shares not just a sense of urgency but also a cause for motivation. Jesus looks at people with compassion. He does not see, as we might expect, people with their lives together. He sees people who are “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” He sees people who know the challenges of the world and the burdens of sin.

Perhaps that describes you today. You may not feel you are a fitting part of the harvest for God because of your struggles and sins. Jesus reaches out to hurting people with grace and

compassion, inviting them to see him as the good shepherd who gives himself up for the sheep (John 10:11, 14-15). No sinner is too far gone to become a fruitful part of God’s harvest.

This reality should give urgency to the mission of any Christ follower. Who will tell the hurting world the news of the good shepherd? Jesus has commissioned his followers to share the gospel (Matthew 28:19-20). All who follow him are called to seek the Lord’s harvest.

Are you willing to pray and work for this harvest?

Lord of the harvest, provide laborers who can introduce hurting people to the good shepherd’s compassionate care. May your Spirit prepare me for this work. Amen.

THE REWARD OF HARVEST LABOR

The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops.
—2 Timothy 2:6

At times, the work of harvesting can seem overwhelming. Acres of fields lie ready for harvest, all at the same time. Much work must be done as quickly as possible. Farmers face challenges from weather, mechanical breakdowns, and physical fatigue. Who has the energy to get through it all?

Similarly, the task of Christian discipleship can seem wearying. So many sins and temptations distract us. So many causes need support. So many people have never heard of Jesus. How can we hope to have the strength for it all?

A farmer does not push through the wearying weeks of harvest just to drive machinery or to multiply the hours worked. No, the focus is on the promising crop being gathered.

Similarly, we find hope in our work as followers of Christ. We

do not merely seek to complete moral tasks or make spiritual accomplishments. Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, we find strength in "the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 1:1).

Jesus has finished his work. He accomplished that on the cross. And he will give strength to all who lean on him in all that makes us spiritually weary today. Yes, the work of Christian living requires great commitment. But his grace will sustain us till the harvest is complete.

Sometimes we grow weary, Lord. The work before us seems overwhelming. Send fellow laborers to encourage us in our work. Energize us with your grace until your harvest is complete. In Jesus, Amen.

A DISCIPLINED HARVEST

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

—Hebrews 12:11

He sat in a wheelchair, his life suddenly changed in alarming ways. “Why do I have to go through this?” he asked, disappointment hanging in the air.

Sometimes we think of such situations as punishment. We even look for connections between life’s disappointments and our sins. But struggles like this do not usually relate to punishment; they are just part of life in a broken world.

Dealing with them can involve discipline, however. And discipline, though it can be painful, will yield results.

It takes discipline to get up early and work all day to bring in a harvest. It takes discipline to work methodically down a row of trees to pick the good fruit and leave the bad behind when a deadline is looming.

Discipline combines instruction and warning. The word for “discipline” in Hebrews 12 suggests the kind of training needed to help a child grow. The words *discipline* and *disciple* share a common root. Sometimes discipleship as God’s children involves difficulty and correction too.

God’s goal is to make us like Christ, who suffered but also triumphed over sin and disappointment. Even in discipline, God loves his people and seeks to cultivate holiness in us for Jesus’ sake.

Father, help us to endure hardship—and discipline, when needed—knowing that you love us. Thank you for Jesus’ example, and make us more like him. In his name, Amen.

THE FRUIT OF REPENTANCE

“Every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”
—Matthew 3:10

The image of someone being cut down and thrown into the fire can sound harsh and brutal, especially in our Western culture today. We are not used to hearing a tongue-lashing such as John the Baptist spoke here, at least not in a public forum.

Yet any farmer knows that untended weeds can choke out a crop. Over the course of the growing season, weeds must be controlled relentlessly through cultivating, or perhaps with weedkiller—and sometimes they must be pulled by hand.

The call to repentance and change forms an essential part of the gospel message. Just as a conscientious farmer does not simply rest after planting good seed, so also a heart transformed by God’s grace is always on the lookout for sin. The religious leaders of John’s day did not practice such sin control but

thought they could rest in their own goodness. But they were not producing good fruit, so John called them to repentance.

As we repent and seek relief from the weeds in our souls, God’s Spirit gives new and surprising fruit. This is in line with John’s command to “produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”

Hard words are necessary sometimes to point us to the forgiving grace of Jesus, which keeps our soul’s weeds in check and allows new fruit to grow.

I know, Lord, that there are weeds in my soul. Help me to repent, and send your Spirit into my heart, that my life may yield a rich harvest for you. Amen.

A HARVEST PROMISE

The LORD will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest.
—Psalm 85:12

Sometimes the growing season seems very long. Months go by, and at times the growth of a crop seems almost imperceptible. In midsummer, the calendar seems full of weeks when storms or disease might threaten a crop, and harvest-time seems far away.

The same is true in our living before the Lord. While we occasionally have seasons of rapid growth in our faith, at other times the harvest seems far away, with many obstacles and challenges to trip us up. Storms of anger sweep over us, and we speak harsh words to a spouse or a child. We wilt in the heat and drought of financial pressures, and we are tempted to cut corners as stewards of the resources God has given.

When the harvest seems so far off, we need to hear again God's promise. Yes, sin is a reality we

need to deal with. Yes, God judges our sin. But God has also shown us his unfailing love and has given us salvation in Christ.

The psalmist invites us to "listen to what God the LORD says" and to hear God's promise of peace. Jesus paid the price of our sin and completely fulfilled the demands of God's law on our behalf. In him, the harvest is guaranteed.

"The LORD will indeed give [us] what is good." In due time, our lives will yield a harvest in Christ.

Holy God, thank you for the word of peace you speak to us. Forgive our sins for Jesus' sake, and open our eyes to the growing seeds of righteousness and faithfulness within us. Amen.

HARVEST FROM A STUMP

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
—Isaiah 11:1

I talked with a man whose life could be described as a stump; the tree of his life had been cut down—by his own hand. He had squandered everything he had been given—possessions, family, relationships. Looking at his life ahead, all he could see was years behind bars.

Stumps don't typically make us think of a rich harvest. But God has a way of bringing new life to dead things. Israel's time had come to an end, it seemed. The people had squandered everything God had so generously given them. As a nation, they faced exile and destruction. But God still had something in store for them: from a stump, fruit would still come.

Isaiah's prophecy looked ahead to the coming of God's promised Savior, Jesus Christ. Although the royal line descending from David, the son of

Jesse, had been cut back, we are reminded that life is ultimately rooted in God. The faithful God would bring his people righteousness and justice, even if their stump seemed dead.

The result of Jesus' faithful life and saving death is peace for God's people—transforming our driest and deadest landscapes into places of growth and hope. In Jesus' death and resurrection, God has brought forth fruit from what seemed a dry stump. And he will do the same for all who trust in Christ.

Do you trust in him?

Faithful God, thank you for your miraculous work. Where our lives are dry and dead, fill us with the knowledge of your love so that we can bear fruit in Christ. Amen.

A HARVEST WARNING

Land that . . . produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receive the blessing of God. . . . But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless. . . .
—Hebrews 6:7-8

In the area where I live, the landscape and soil quality varies widely from one field to another. Some soil on hill-sides is thin and rocky, and the wind quickly evaporates moisture that falls on it. Some fields are in low areas susceptible to flooding. Others are rich, flat, and ideal for producing crops.

A farmer would be foolish to tend a rocky hillside plot in the same way he tends a field rich in loam. The harvest of a poor field does not justify the ongoing costs of fertilizer, seed, fuel, and the toll on machinery.

The writer of Hebrews issues a strong warning about the harvest of our lives. Sometimes we become complacent about our walk with Christ. Finances, sports, fashion, and a host of other distractions keep us from spiritual growth. The words we read today are not intended to

make sincere believers uneasy with the threat of judgment; instead they challenge our complacency by pointing to the seriousness of our calling.

Our hope as believers in Christ is not in what we have done. Still, what we do indicates our hope. A life based on anything other than Jesus' saving work is thin and shallow. It will soon go out of production. But in Christ we are confident of better things—a harvest that accompanies salvation.

Holy God, we do not like to hear about the possibility of judgment. Yet we need this warning. Keep us from complacency. Send us your Spirit, that our faith in Jesus may grow. Amen.

CROPS AND WEEDS

"When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared."
—Matthew 13:26

In farming, weed control is a common process, and it takes a lot of work. Today herbicides and other products are often used to control the growth of destructive, unwanted plants.

In Jesus' day, however, no such products were available. Undetected weeds would grow along with a crop, crowding out growing plants and competing for valuable sunlight and for nutrients in the soil.

In our growth and development as followers of Christ, we learn that the devil works to choke out a possible harvest. He can't uproot the good seed sown by God's Word, but he can try to crowd out its growth. Perhaps you've seen this in your own life. Broken family relationships and friendships, selfishness, greed, immorality, and turning back to old habits seem to overtake the growth of God's good

seed, and we wonder if there will be a harvest.

Jesus' story makes clear that God is not the author of evil: "An enemy did this." And yet the story also shows God's ability to produce a harvest despite the presence of evil. While we should not embrace anything that works against God's will, we need not worry that evil can choke out the growth of the good seed God sows.

This is good news! Though we can't protect ourselves from every evil influence, we can be sure that God will protect his harvest in us.

So many weeds grow among the good seed of our lives, Lord. By your Spirit, work within us, guard our hearts, and keep our hope of the harvest alive. Amen.

A HARVEST ACCOUNTING

"At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard." —Luke 20:10

It was common in Jesus' day for one person to own land farmed by another. This is still true today. Understandably, at harvest time, a payment for the use of the land is expected. But in Jesus' story, the tenants refused to pay, and they violently attacked the landlord's representatives—even killing his own son.

Jesus told this story as a warning for his opponents among the religious leaders. Just as past generations had ignored and mistreated God's Word through the prophets, the religious leaders of his day were rejecting God's own Son.

Jesus' words are intended to draw our attention to the harvest day too. The Bible makes clear that what we have does not belong to us; we are stewards of all that God has made us to be and given us to use.

Though we may not literally beat and kill prophetic figures, we too may tend to live as if God were not present with us each day. Jesus warns that eventually our harvest time will come, either through death or at Christ's return. Then we will have to give an account of our relationship with him as stewards of his gifts.

Our lives are not our own; we belong to God, and we are called to live for God. What are you doing to deepen your relationship with the Son so that you are prepared at harvest time?

Lord, we often like to live in the here and now, without thinking about the harvest. But someday we will have to account for our lives. Prepare us now through Jesus, your Son. Amen.

THE HARVEST OF THE EARTH

“Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe.”
—Revelation 14:15

Though the harvest represents the climax of a season’s labor, it can also be a messy business. Grain must be separated from the stalks on which it grows. Fruit is gathered, washed, and separated—and to make juice for human consumption it is pressed and strained, and the peels and seeds are cast aside.

The Bible often uses the harvest as an image of God’s judgment on both God’s people and his enemies. At the end of time, God will gather up our life’s work and measure its eternal value. Judgment may be favorable, for a crop worth preserving. Or it may involve destruction.

Judgment does not sit easily with us today because we often operate with an “I’m OK, you’re OK” mentality. But the Bible reminds us that God is a holy God and that evil has no place in his presence. Does the

abuse, violence, manipulation, and hurt in the world trouble you? There will come a time when all that has been inflicted on us—and what we inflict on others—will be strained and cast out of God’s presence. Only the good will remain.

All of us deserve judgment. But those who trust in Jesus have the assurance that he has already endured the “winepress of God’s wrath” for them.

Praise God for this harvest hope, which is the only hope to which we can cling.

Righteous and just God, we know that judgment is a serious thing, because sin is serious. Thank you for the work of Jesus, which gives us a firm place to stand. We pray in his name. Amen.

A REFRESHING CONCLUSION

Like a snow-cooled drink at harvest time is a trustworthy messenger to the one who sends him; he refreshes the spirit of his master.

—Proverbs 25:13

A few years ago in the area where I live, a major snowstorm came at the end of October. For farmers with crops still in the field, such an early snow is anything but refreshing. It makes for a muddy, wet mess as the remaining crops are harvested.

For the ancient Israelites, however, snow was an encouraging sign. As summer turned to fall in the hot climate of Palestine, it was refreshing to see snow begin covering the northern mountains and to know that a quieter season lay ahead. And in those days before refrigeration, receiving a drink cooled by snow was a rare treat.

Perhaps you find yourself in the midst of a busy season. God meets us at times when we feel overwhelmed by the tasks looming ahead, or emotionally exhausted by all we've been dealing with. He calls us to "lift

up [our] eyes to the mountains" and to trust that our "help comes from the LORD" (Psalm 121:1-2).

What's more, God has sent his own Son to be a trustworthy messenger of his refreshing gift (Acts 3:19-20). To all who trust in Jesus, God gives the promise that his harvest work in our souls will bring us rest.

Look today for that faithful messenger, the Savior, and trust in him for true refreshment.

Heavenly Father, we often find ourselves worn out by the pace of life and by all we face here on this earth. Help us to find your refreshment for us in Christ. Amen.

PATIENCE FOR THE HARVEST

See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. —James 5:7

“Patience is a virtue,” an old proverb says. Certainly this is true when growing crops. Apples don’t blossom one day and bear fruit the next. Seeds don’t sprout and immediately offer ripe grain. People who tend the soil must wait patiently for their harvest, enduring the reality that much about growth is out of their control.

Such patient waiting is an act of faith and hope. All through the growing season, a farmer looks ahead to the promise of a “valuable crop.” The farmer may plant and tend the seed, but it is “the land” that yields the crop.

In the same way, followers of Jesus live in faith and hope that through all the circumstances of life, God promises to bring about a valuable harvest in our lives. Jesus has not forgotten his people. He has given his life for

them; he will return to judge sin and destroy it forever. In the meantime, we wait patiently.

Do you presently face unfair pressure at work, betrayal from family members or friends, or injustice from society? Are you weighed down by your own sin or by temptations? Remember how God sustained his people in the past and on through many ages to the present. Trust that God will also send timely relief through Christ’s compassion and mercy as you wait for the harvest of his “valuable crop.”

Patient God, give us patience and endurance as we wait for you. Help us to trust that you will send what we need to bring about something valuable in our lives, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

FRUIT IN EVERY SEASON

On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. —Revelation 22:2

In the Northern Hemisphere, the end of October brings the conclusion of the growing season. Though harvest continues in a few southern areas, most crops are finished by November. Until spring, the land lies quiet in the winter cold.

Our lives here on earth also have periods of quiet when it seems that not much growth takes place. Sometimes we feel guilty for that: we sense that we ought to be able to do more, to grow more, to feel more holy. In his book *Spiritual Rhythm*, Mark Buchanan writes, "Winter hides God."

But the Christian faith looks forward to a day when growth will be continual. The Bible portrays the life of God in the new heaven and earth flowing without interruption to his people. Instead of a lull in the dead and

cold of winter, God's healing power will always bear fruit.

Further, the Bible pictures this great harvest in the midst of a city. Cities and harvests normally don't go together. Farms and orchards lie outside cities, and food is brought in to areas where more people live. But in God's new creation, Jesus the Lamb will always be close to his people to provide all that they need.

What a marvelous picture of God's goodness!

Father, we look forward to the day when we will see your perfect goodness for us all of the time. Make our hearts and lives ready for the perfect joy of life with you in the new heaven and new earth. Amen.

GOD'S HARVEST FAITHFULNESS

"As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease."

—Genesis 8:22

We've come to the end of this series of reflections on the promise of harvest in this world and in our souls. We have seen how the process of growth in creation offers a fitting picture of the work God is doing in the human heart, and how that process leads us to deeper trust and hope in the work of Christ.

Today we are reminded again of God's faithfulness throughout both the natural and spiritual processes of harvest. As the story of the flood reminds us, judgment is a reality. A perfectly righteous and holy God does not simply look the other way when we sin. But judgment is not the only word.

We live in a world where floods, droughts, and other disasters sometimes affect the prospect of a harvest. We also recognize that temptation, hurt, despair, and our own foolishness can af-

fect the growth God cultivates in our souls. And sometimes, as with the great flood in Noah's day, it may seem all is lost.

Yet God remains faithful. Just as God showed mercy to Noah and his family, so in Christ God demonstrates his faithfulness to us all.

Follow Jesus, embrace his Spirit's cultivation of new life in your heart, and live in the trust and joy that God's promised harvest gives you certainty for all eternity.

Faithful God, we praise you for your commitment to us. Bring us to Jesus so that we can grasp the full assurance of your harvest work in us. In his name we pray. Amen.



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