

July/Aug 2017

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

RELATING
to
OTHERS

ALSO: SONGS OF
THE SCRIPTURES

Friends:

One of the great themes of Scripture is the unity of God's people. Sin has broken our ability to love others as ourselves, and we all know we are guilty of putting ourselves first. One of the first words we learn as infants is "Mine, mine, mine!" But as new creations in Christ, we can once again begin to love God and our neighbor, carrying one another's burdens, striving to be one body in Christ by the power of the Spirit.



Our cover image illustrates this spiritual reality with colorful ropes. We can be bound to one another as we were meant to be, and we are held together at the center by the power of God's Spirit.

In July, Pastor George R. Young explores with us how God energizes our interpersonal relationships. Unity in Christ is both a gift from God and a task he gives us to fulfill.

Then in August, Pastor John Van Schepen leads us in discovering how we can praise God together using music and the songs of Scripture itself. As we sing together, we sing with the saints of all ages.

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

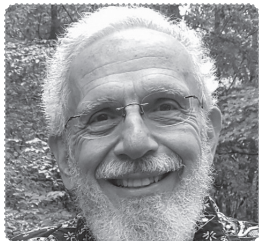
A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Steven Koster".

—Steven Koster

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"Relating to Others"
George R. Young



"Songs of the Scriptures"
John Van Schepen

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ReFrame
Media

Relating to Others

George R. Young

july

This month, let's seek God's help together in improving our interpersonal relationships. This means we'll also be looking at our relationship with God, which has a direct effect on all our other relationships. Within the family, the church, and society at large, we can all benefit from exploring the basic biblical principles of relationships as each day we relate to others.

George Young graduated from the City College of New York and from Westminster Seminary and studied at L'Abri Fellowship, Switzerland, and at Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan. He was a pastor in Kalamazoo, Michigan, before he and his family were called to serve as missionaries in metropolitan Tokyo and northern Japan. He and his wife, Ruth, are now retired and living in New Jersey near their children and grandchildren.

Songs of the Scriptures

John Van Schepen

august

Years ago only psalms were sung in many churches. These were considered to be the "songs of the Scriptures." However, there are many other references in the Bible to songs and singing, usually expressed in praise to God. This month we will look at some of those biblical references, and we pray that these songs will encourage us all to rejoice in the Lord always and to recognize the significance of praising God in our daily walk with him.

John Van Schepen served as a pastor in five different congregations before retiring several years ago. He and his wife, Willie, now live in Oregon, where they spend much of their time with their grandchildren. They also enjoy traveling, especially to Africa, where they help in training pastors and church leaders through the Timothy Leadership Training Institute.

THE FOUNDATION

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge. . . .

—Proverbs 1:7

This month, as we explore how to relate to others, it's important to know that the Bible's wisdom is not a series of self-help techniques. Instead, the Bible shows that all our relationships depend on the foundation of knowing and trusting God through faith. That's what "the fear of the Lord" refers to: living in awe of God's power, holiness, and amazing love, and wanting to show honor and love for God in all we do.

This way of life begins with realizing we are not as nice as we like to think we are. All our ruptured relationships, from simmering anger to outright wars, are a result of sin, in which we broke our relationship with God. The brokenness began when we disobeyed God and brought the curse of death on our heads (Genesis 3). But God solved that problem by sending

his Son to take on the curse for us. Now our relationship with God can be restored when we repent and ask for forgiveness through the Son, Jesus, by God's amazing grace.

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge." This is not the kind of knowledge based only on facts or information. It comes from the understanding and wisdom for daily living that we learn in growing to know God. The knowledge that begins with the foundation of faith in God is evident in wise actions, "prudent behavior, doing what is right and just and fair." It helps us through life and guides us in relating to others.

Guide us, Lord, teaching us wisdom and love, leading us to restored, enriching relationships. Amen.

HIDING FROM GOD AND FROM ONE ANOTHER

The man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God. . . .
—Genesis 3:8

From the time of the fall into sin, people have tried to hide from God in many ways. Today many publishers and media outlets compete to attract people's attention by making outrageous statements. Some have even said, "God is dead," and, "God is not good," adding to the ways of hiding from God by going on the offensive against him.

There is nothing new about such claims. Even 3,000 years ago, King David heard similar remarks and wrote, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Psalm 14:1).

Adam and Eve hid from God because they were afraid. They knew they had disobeyed God and that evil had gained a foothold in their hearts. In their shame, they could not face the Lord as he came to meet with them. Adam tried shifting the blame to Eve. By ruptur-

ing their relationship with God, they became estranged from one another.

Some play the blame game by saying that evil in the world is God's fault, and they refuse to believe in him. As alienation from God grows deeper, people hide from one another. They fear that if their real selves became known, no one would like them.

But God forgives. Have you asked his forgiveness today?

What insecure lives we lead, O God! Fear and anxiety isolate us. Reconcile us to yourself, as you promised Adam and Eve, through the Savior who makes forgiveness possible. In his name, Amen.

NEITHER GENTILE NOR JEW

Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised . . . but Christ is all, and is in all.

—Colossians 3:11

In ancient times the Jews were oppressed by one Gentile nation after another: Egyptians, Philistines, Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, and more. Shortly after Paul wrote this letter to the Colossians, the volatile relationship between the Jews and their Roman rulers exploded into war.

Josephus was a Jewish freedom fighter in Galilee, one of the leaders of a futile revolt that ended with the Romans burning the temple and destroying Jerusalem (A.D. 66-70). In his book *The Jewish War*, Josephus tells how the Romans savagely crucified thousands upon thousands of Jews in retaliation.

How could a Jew ever love a Gentile? But, said Paul to the Jewish and Gentile Christians, hatred was a thing of their past, for they were now born again. By believing in Christ, they were

united with him in death and raised to new life. Believers were also united with each other to form a new chosen people that included Jews as well as Gentiles. They were to clothe themselves with “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” They were to “bear with each other” and forgive whatever grievances they had, to put on love and “let the peace of Christ rule” in their hearts.

New life in Christ breaks down the most bitter walls of hostility and floods our relationships with love so that we may begin again. Peace with God brings peace between people.

Lord, how can we let go of our grievances? Help us to forgive, and give us freedom in Christ to begin anew. Amen.

HUMILITY

Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.
—Numbers 12:3

Moses' relationship with his sister, Miriam, and brother, Aaron, was complicated. Miriam had been used by God to rescue baby Moses from slaughter, and Aaron had been Moses' mouthpiece when speaking to the king of Egypt (see Exodus 1-3). Doubtless the three loved each other. Yet sibling rivalry apparently began to gnaw at Miriam and Aaron: they didn't like Moses' foreign wife, and they seemed jealous of Moses' position as God's special prophet. They began to talk against Moses: "Hasn't [God] also spoken through us?"

Moses' humility and love were evident in that he didn't hold a grudge against his brother and sister for undercutting him. He hadn't been looking for prestige when God chose him to be the leader of Israel. He hadn't even wanted the job! He also knew that his privilege of speaking

face to face with God was completely because of God's grace. He didn't become proud. Like Jesus, Moses was an intercessor. He pleaded with God for Miriam's healing.

Moses' humility was precisely what made him a great servant of God. As Jesus said, "The greatest among you will be your servant" (Matthew 23:11).

As Colossians 3:12 says, "Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." We know from Jesus' and Moses' examples that humility covers a multitude of sins, and it brings healing to what would otherwise be ruined relationships.

Lord, give us patience and humility, and make us instruments of your peace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

GUIDELINES FOR HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

God spoke all these words: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."

—Exodus 20:1

Just a few months after delivering his people Israel from slavery in Egypt, God gave them his commands from the smoking, trembling summit of Mount Sinai (see Exodus 19). And these commands are the standard for humankind: they drive us to ask for forgiveness, and they teach us how to live.

Bible teachers often point out that the Ten Commandments, written by God on two tables of stone, can be divided into two parts: the first part concerning our relationship with God (vv. 3-11), and the second part concerning our relationships with others (vv. 12-17). Many teachers also point out that Jesus summarized the law in two parts along these lines: *Love God* and *Love your neighbor* (see Matthew 22:37-40).

Today the commands of the two tables are still important for

keeping our relationships with God and humanity healthy. We cannot expect to live a fulfilling life if we ignore God, worship money, use God's name as a curse, work 24/7, disrespect our parents, hurt others, live promiscuously, steal, lie, or desire what rightfully belongs to others. If we don't care about these basic guidelines for life—or even just some of them—our relationships will suffer.

Have you asked God to help you follow his way today?

Lord, we know your law is our light and our guide for life. Give us strength to live wisely and to walk in the way of Christ's love, which you laid out so clearly for us here. In Jesus' name, Amen.

TWO GREAT COMMANDMENTS

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." . . . 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

—Matthew 22:37-39

If you've ever visited a lawyer's office and seen bookshelves filled with impressive bound volumes explaining laws and many years' worth of legal cases, the sight can be pretty overwhelming. It can make people want to entrust their case to the expert who understands it all.

But the law of God that governs our relationships is not difficult to understand.

Jesus said, "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." And "these two commandments" are *Love God* and *Love your neighbor*. It's a simple yet profound summary of the purpose of the whole law of God. Justice in society and harmony in all our relationships hang on these two basic commandments, summarizing the two tables of the law.

Some folks think you don't need some parts of the com-

mandments—that you can get along with your neighbor, for example, without loving or even believing in God. But that kind of thinking just deepens the rift between classes, ethnicities, generations, and the sexes. Even a truce results only in a loveless standoff, characterized by tense and strained relations, lacking in mutual trust.

Loving God, loving others. Like two sides of a coin, these go together and can't be separated. Together they are the key to harmony.

Your law, O Lord, is so simple and yet so profound. By your Spirit, move in our hearts and fill us with love for you and for one another, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

THE CENTRALITY OF LOVE

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."
—John 13:34

Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of the Sherlock Holmes detective series, wrote a lesser-known book called *The White Company*. It's about English knights fighting in France during the Middle Ages—an exciting adventure! But readers today may wonder why the English knights were always looking for famous French knights to "cross swords" with or to charge at on horseback and "break a spear." It was basically done for honor, and not particularly to fight an enemy.

That kind of honor may be puzzling for some of us to understand. Tim Keller, pastor of a church in New York City, conducted a study of various societies and learned that some societies are "honor societies," in which honor is the main ideal. By contrast, in societies that are strongly influenced by Christ, love is the central ideal.

Sometimes we don't live up to our ideals, but they are the goals we aim for. And we must be careful not to lose sight of our goals or get confused. For example, if we think that love is basically romance (useful during dating and courtship), we may wake up one day and realize we never knew what love is.

The essence of love is giving, and that will often involve sacrifice. Jesus showed this by his example. Love is costly, directed toward the benefit of others. It is not preoccupied with itself or with self-comfort, honor, or reputation.

Do we love like that?

Lord Jesus, help us to live for you and for others—not being self-centered but God-centered. Amen.

SUBMISSION

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

—Ephesians 5:21

“Why don’t you throw away those old pants?” my wife said. “They’re stained and frayed around the cuffs. They make you look sloppy.” I bristled at her suggestion. It pushed my “contrary button,” as we say in our family. I dug in my heels and got stubborn: “Yeah, but they’re my most comfortable pants. Who cares how they look?”

I’ve found that a lot of people have a “contrary button.” If we don’t like someone’s idea, even if their suggestion is reasonably, politely, and mildly expressed, rebelliousness stirs in our heart. Submission calls for humility, but we will often choose to be stubborn rather than submit. Psalm 32:9 counsels us, “Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle.”

Why does Paul say, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ”? Surely it is because Christ, though being fully God, “made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Philippians 2:7). He served his disciples by washing their feet (John 13). And he died the death of a criminal—for us.

If our Lord humbled himself and submitted to death on a cross, why do I feel I should be boss all the time, always in control and getting my way? Let’s learn submissiveness from him.

Lord Jesus, you are the head of the church. We know it cost you your life. Take from us any desire to lord it over anyone. Give us submissive hearts toward you and others. For your sake, Amen.

LOVE IS NOT RUDE

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking. . . .

—1 Corinthians 13:4-5

In the middle of this list of love's qualities, most of which are easy to understand, is one that may sound simple but is really difficult to define: "Love . . . does not dishonor others." Another translation says, "It is not rude."

Each society has different ideas of what's polite and what's rude. In some societies it is polite to burp after a meal to let the cook know how delicious and satisfying the meal was. In other societies people would be shocked and embarrassed to hear a burp, and the one who burped would apologize for his rudeness.

In any society, people are trained from childhood in their culture's rules of politeness. Some people think politeness is the same as snobbish hypocrisy. They may deliberately enjoy disrupting a society's way of doing things. But politeness is sim-

ply one way of showing love, respect, and honor for others.

We're supposed to honor not just our father and mother, "stand up in the presence of the aged, [and] show respect for the elderly" (Leviticus 19:32). We are to respect all people, regardless of age, for love is not rude. "It does not dishonor others."

Lord God, you can see through the veneer of hypocrisy, where the heart really has no love. Plant in us true respect and love for others, that we may honor them in our hearts and in our openly expressed manners. Amen.

PERSONAL COMMUNICATION

The LORD said, "... I will go down and see."

—Genesis 18:20-21

When the Lord and two angels visited Abraham as travelers, God had two purposes in mind: to tell Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son, and to see if Sodom and Gomorrah should be destroyed for their wickedness.

Abraham humbly served his guests a meal as they sat in the shade, and the Lord told him that Sarah would have a son in about a year. Then, as they began to leave, God said he was going to see if Sodom was as wicked as he had heard. And Abraham appealed to the Lord not to destroy it if even some of the people were righteous, for his nephew Lot and his family lived there.

Some philosophers have said that stories like this are quaint and primitive. To think that the Creator of the universe would bother to talk with a human be-

ing and concern himself with the messy situations we get ourselves into! It just doesn't make sense, they say.

But God is not distant and uncommunicative. He loves us, as he loved Abraham and Sarah. It is a mark of love and friendship that God comes to communicate with us, and that we open our hearts first of all to God and also to one another. Some find this hard to do, but for all of us it is important to put our thoughts into words. We are not strangers on a bus, sitting stony-faced and silent next to each other until we reach our destination.

Are you open to visiting with others today?

Lord, give us the love, the will, and the words to communicate with others and with you. Amen.

YOUNG AND OLD TOGETHER IN CHRIST

He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents. . . . —Malachi 4:6

What different worlds the young and old often live in, from one generation to the next! My granddaughter tells me of cool social media sites and new apps she can download instantly—and many are soon replaced by other, “better” ones. With so much technology and texting today, however, many young people are missing out on developing social skills with one another as well as with older folks.

Doubtless there has always been a gap between young and old, but we may wonder if in some ways it is widening.

There’s also polarization, with so many worldviews and political views. From the French Revolution on down to the Russian and Maoist revolutions, the teaching of alienation and class warfare has deepened estrangement between people

and tried to drive God from our midst. My own generation sowed seeds of alienation too, simply assuming that people would be estranged from each other, and almost celebrating it.

But Christ does not abandon us to isolation. He has reconciled us with God and made new life possible. Think how rich our relationships could be if young and old talked and listened to each other more! It would be like the happiness when the gap between God and his children is bridged. Can you reach out to someone today?

O Lord, how sad it is to be estranged, from you and from each other. If we’ve grown unable to communicate, give us the courage to talk, the patience to listen, and the desire to be helpful to each other. Amen.

THANK YOU; I'M SORRY; PLEASE . . .

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.

—Psalm 118:1

We often use certain words and phrases in our relationship with the Lord: “Thank you”; “I’m sorry”; “Please, if it is your will.” Our words flow from the nature of the One to whom we are speaking. If he were not the wonderful God that he is, our vocabulary would be different.

I remember the Soviet dictator Nikita Khrushchev standing to speak at the United Nations, taking off his shoe, pounding it on the podium, and shouting at his enemies, “We will bury you!” On another occasion Fidel Castro, visiting from Cuba, killed a chicken in his New York hotel room and spread the feathers and blood all around the room before going to the U.N. Their ideology said there is no God, and any hate-filled, belligerent words and actions were OK.

Christians use godly, not hate-filled, words when talking to

fellow humans. Why should we say “Thanks!” to someone who did something nice for us, rather than just take it for granted? Why should we say “I’m sorry” when we do something wrong or hurt someone, or “Sorry to trouble you” when someone has to go out of their way to help us? Why should we praise someone for the good qualities they have, rather than being envious? Because God is love, and he sets the pattern for our relationships.

Thank you, Lord, for your love. We’re sorry for sinning against you and others. Thank you for the beauty of your earth and for your gift of salvation. Please bless us and help us to live for your glory and for the well-being of those around us. Amen.

BE CONSIDERATE

"In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."

—Matthew 7:12

Being around considerate people is nice. They seem to know what you're going through, and they gently offer help and comfort to make your path easier. They see how tired you are, and they offer a meal and some rest, even putting a blanket over you so you won't get chilly as you lie down to rest.

Is it that they're not just thinking about themselves all the time? Not exactly. They know what would make them rest comfortably, so they do it to you! As Jesus commanded, they do to others what they would like done to themselves.

Paul describes another example: "Husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body,

just as Christ does the church" (Ephesians 5:28-29).

But let's not get Jesus and Paul wrong. They're not telling us to be considerate just because it benefits us. We are called to love others without conditions, with no strings attached. If we stop being considerate to someone because they aren't considerate in return, our motives probably are selfish.

In a world of selfishness, being truly considerate is a breath of fresh air. It warms the heart and ties us together in love.

Lord, take our selfish hearts and transform them. Use our grasping knowledge of what would please us, and direct it outward, that we may be thoughtful of others and lighten their burdens. In Jesus' name, Amen.

A CERTAIN TOUGHNESS

“Go up and down the streets of Jerusalem, look around and consider, search through her squares. If you can find but one person who deals honestly and seeks the truth, I will forgive this city.”

—Jeremiah 5:1

Love calls for a certain toughness of mind—not looking down on others or hating them, even if we know their sins and flaws. Jesus is the perfect example of this combination of toughness and gentleness.

Jeremiah 6:14 says, “They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. ‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace.” Of all people, Christians should not be gullible. We should know how deeply sin has corrupted the world and how hard it is to restore relationships. The apostle Paul, echoing our verse for today and other passages, says, “There is no one righteous, not even one” (Romans 3:10). That includes us—unless we turn to Jesus. Thankfully, God’s grace is greater than all our sin.

It is said that the ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes went around Athens, holding up a lantern, peering into people’s faces, looking for an honest man. Their consciences, it seems, couldn’t meet his gaze, and they looked away.

People from every economic and social level cover up dishonesty. No one wants God’s searchlight to uncover their sin. It takes a tough attitude to achieve justice, to sift through lies to find the truth. Getting to know people takes time.

Do we even know ourselves?

O God, you see into our hearts. Give us eyes to see what is really there. May we turn from our sin and honor you. Teach us from Jesus’ example. Amen.

CRUCIFY THE FLESH

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.
—Galatians 5:24

"I couldn't help it," said Jack. "It" was his lust, which he frequently fed. "I just lost it," said Jill. What she lost was control of her sharp tongue, which she regularly used to cut people down. Some think there's no use fighting "it."

A *Far Side* cartoon by Gary Larson depicts a woman clinging for dear life to a parking meter. She is being sucked off her feet, as if by a huge vacuum, pulled toward the door of a candy store. I understand the temptation, since I absolutely love chocolate! But, of course, eating chocolate is not a sin. Obsessing over it or overindulging in it, though, can be sinful. For any of us, temptations to sin can be so strong that they can be hard to resist.

Paul says we must crucify "the flesh"—our sinful passions and desires. We might think this is

simply a vivid metaphor. But that is not the case. Believing in Christ, our spirits are united with him in his death on the cross.

Every day we must put to death "the acts of the flesh," such as sexual immorality, hatred, jealousy—today's verses list a host of offenses. Such sins wage war on our souls and play havoc with our relationships.

Crucifying the flesh—saying "No!" to the passions that besiege us—is torture, just as crucifixion was a form of torture. But with God's help and through the power of the Holy Spirit, it can be done.

Thank you Father, that we are united with Christ in his death and resurrection, and that your Spirit lives within us. Help us to grow in godliness. Amen.

SEEKING PEACE AND PROSPERITY

"Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."
—Jeremiah 29:7

There is a kind of piety that has no concern for society. But that is not an attitude learned from the Lord.

If anyone might have thought it was justified to ignore the society around them, it was the Jews, carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. But the Lord commanded them to seek the peace and prosperity of Babylon, their home in exile, and even to pray for it.

You could call this attitude "civic spirit": not just being concerned for oneself, or one's family and friends, but also for society at large. Some illustrious Jews, those who sought the peace of Babylon and Persia, come to mind: Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, Nehemiah, Esther, Mordecai. Some served in high office during the years of exile. Today,

many believers in the true God show the same example.

Civic spirit involves taking care of society at large. Your service doesn't have to be as an ambassador for your government; it can be as basic as serving on your neighborhood association, or picking up broken bottles and litter in the park down the street, making it so that where you live is pleasant and safe rather than the opposite. If no one cares about their community, all their relationships will languish.

Lord, we pray for our town or city, our country, our world. It can be depressing to hear of so much trouble in the news. Give us a sense of calling; show us what we can do as salt and light in society today. In Jesus, Amen.

GENTLENESS

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.
—Proverbs 15:1

Today we might paraphrase our verse here to say that “a gentle answer defuses wrath.” An argument can easily escalate to the point where a single harsh word can cause an explosion of anger. If that happens, the blast can deal out sorrow and endless regret.

But a gentle word, with a feather-light touch, can remove the fuse, or whatever might trigger such an explosion. And those who were arguing can step back, take a breath, and avoid incalculable damage to their relationship.

In a passage dealing with trouble between believers, Paul advises, “Let your gentleness be evident to all” (Philippians 4:5). He lists gentleness among the qualities with which we should clothe ourselves: “As God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentle-

ness and patience” (Colossians 3:12). And the apostle Peter says that a gentle spirit “is of great worth in God’s sight” (1 Peter 3:4).

Many people today scorn the quality of gentleness because our times have been infected with a belligerent spirit, preferring confrontation, the harsh demand, the merciless fight.

As you go about your day, do you prefer harshness and belligerence? Or is gentleness evident in your words and actions? Do others see that quality of Christ imitated in you?

Lord, our spirits are weary from the warfare of this world. We long for your gentleness. Transform our rough and harsh hearts, and give us a gentle and quiet spirit. Amen.

LONELINESS

God sets the lonely in families, he leads out the prisoners with singing.
—Psalm 68:6

The lonely—widows, orphans, prisoners, the homeless—what can be done to ease their sense that no one cares? Ultimately, God in his love is our dwelling place. As “a father to the fatherless,” he adopts us as his children. He defends the widow, sets the lonely in families, frees prisoners, and puts a song in their mouths.

When God led Israel through the desert wasteland of the Sinai Peninsula after freeing them from Egypt, he scattered their enemies and refreshed his weary people. And in his law he made special provisions for widows and orphans, for foreigners, visitors, and all who were poor.

To be a part of the people of God, the church of Christ, heirs of the promise, recipients of salvation—this is a great, great blessing. There are people who think

of Christ’s church as boring and a waste of time. They go to worship once or twice and soon give up. But they miss the fellowship that they could enjoy—the fellowship of all who share in God’s deep love and grace, made possible through Christ’s sufferings for all who believe. God’s caring people have a heart for those who are suffering.

Are you following God’s example and caring with compassion for others today?

Lord, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Psalm 73:25-26). May I reach out with your love to people who are lonely. In Jesus, Amen.

STEREOTYPES

"This man . . . loves our nation and has built our synagogue."

—Luke 7:4-5

I'm usually open-minded, but there are times when I find myself stereotyping people to the left and right of me politically, even though I have never met them. When a motorcycle club thunders past me on the road, riding their flame-decaled Harley-Davidsons and flying the national flag, I think I know all about "that type." Or when I read of some people's exotic theories about food, or see people riding expensive bicycles for exercise and wearing neon, skintight clothes, I stereotype them too. I judge that I don't have to meet them.

But people have a way of surprising you. The Roman centurion stationed in Capernaum didn't fit the stereotype the Jews had of the Romans. He loved their nation and had even built a place of worship for them. He was an understanding man,

wielding authority compassionately. His servant was sick, and he came to Jesus for healing, believing that Jesus had the power to heal by just saying the word. And the servant was healed!

Next time we find ourselves stereotyping and dismissing others, we should recognize that it's important to take the time to meet and get to know them. After all, Jesus commands us to love all his creatures. Even if they fit your stereotypes, don't let that keep you from relating to them. Remember, Jesus loves us all, and we are to follow his example.

Lord, forgive us our prejudices and stupid irritations that stand in the way of loving others. Give us the courage to step out and relate to everyone. In Jesus' name, Amen.

STRESS

We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure. . . . But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God. . . .
—2 Corinthians 1:8-9

I'm guessing that most of us have never been shipwrecked, or been whipped within an inch of our lives, or had a group of assassins after our blood, or been lowered over a city wall in a basket at night to escape our pursuers. But all of those things happened to Paul, and he was frequently under unbearable pressure.

This is not to say we don't live with stress, however. Stress has a way of bending us out of shape, making us act in uncharacteristic ways, and making us more vulnerable than usual to temptation. We find ourselves snapping at people, losing patience when we need it most, or becoming depressed. Ultimately stress can cause us to take our eyes off God and focus only on our problems.

When we're under pressure, it's important to realize that if we

are not careful, it could have an adverse effect on our relationships with others. Most importantly, we should use those situations to learn to rely on God. How do we do that?

Pray, "Lord, help me. I need your wisdom and strength!" Continue to trust God when things are beyond your control. Believe that God can bring victory out of seeming defeat. Continue to obey God's revealed will, his clearly expressed commands. And be courageous.

Lord, we ask not for a stress-free life but that you will teach us to rely on you. Through your Spirit living in our hearts, give us wisdom and strength. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

FORGIVEN AND SET FREE

Jesus . . . asked her, “. . . Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”
—John 8:10-11

God's law in the Old Testament called for various kinds of punishment for various sins, or acts of disobedience to God. Some of those sins were horrible—for example, burning children on the altars of pagan gods. Other sins, such as adultery, were tempting for many men and women. But God did not tolerate sin of any kind.

Patrick Moynihan, a U.S. senator from New York, once said that society is in the process of “defining deviancy down,” declaring certain behaviors permissible that once were not.

But that's not what Jesus taught. By forgiving the adulterous woman, he was not saying that adultery was permissible. She and the man with whom she committed adultery both deserved punishment, according to the law. But Jesus saw her repentance, and with divine

authority he forgave her and said, “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

It's a dilemma: we can't live with the law, and we can't live without it. We don't solve anything by making murder legal, or saying adultery is OK. We don't protect human relationships by “defining deviancy down.” But Jesus rescued the woman from the law's demand, setting her free from self-destructive and other-destructive behavior, to build strong, healthy relationships. He gave her hope and a future, where before there had been none.

Thank you, Jesus, that by bearing our punishment you made a way for us to be forgiven. Lead us to live for you. Amen.

THE GREAT TURN-AROUND

Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

—Ephesians 4:28

Two robbers were crucified with Jesus. One mocked Jesus, hard-hearted to the end. The other repented, seeing that Jesus was innocent and believing that he was who he said he was. He asked Jesus to remember him when he came into his kingdom. Jesus promised they would be together that very day in paradise (Luke 23:39-43).

Conversion to Christ brings a great turn-around in a person's life. One who has been stealing begins to work so that he can generously give to people in need. One whose mouth was filled with gossip, lies, and filthy language begins to talk in a way that helps others instead of corrupting them. A pornography addict learns to control himself and to have a pure mind.

People who don't understand the church think it's only for

basically decent, respectable folk. Yes, God's people often think they are better than others. But God has told us from ancient times that he has blessed us not because we are righteous but so that we can pass the blessing along to others (see Genesis 12:2-3; Deuteronomy 9:4-6).

If we keep in mind that the blessings of salvation are entirely by the grace of God, we'll have the humility—and the boldness—to relate to others in Christ's church and to work together to share his good news with others.

Thank you, Lord, for your grace and for the fellowship of other saved sinners. May we help each other to live holy lives and share your love with others. In Jesus, Amen.

GOING BACK TO THE BEGINNING

"Haven't you read," [Jesus] replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female' . . . 'and the two will become one flesh'?"
—Matthew 19:4-5

We live in a time of great controversy. With the U.S. Supreme Court decision declaring it unconstitutional to outlaw same-sex marriages, it has become evident again that morality cannot be legislated, as Billy Graham once said.

Even the Law of Moses made some concessions to the hardness of people's hearts. The Pharisees tried to lure Jesus into the swamp of discussing divorce and when it might be permissible, according to Moses. Jesus refused to get drawn into their fruitless legal argument. Instead, he called them back to the beginning, before the law was given, before sin entered the world. God created us male and female, and he gave men and women to each other in marriage. Only within this framework of our

created nature can human relationships flourish.

But a created nature is denied when people cease to believe in the Creator. It's like a carpenter stubbornly refusing to use a saw to cut a board—and, instead, bashing away at it with a hammer.

Paul says, "What the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son" (Romans 8:3). Only new birth in Christ is strong enough to restore our nature, whatever sin we struggle with.

Lord, as Augustine put it, "Our hearts are restless until they find rest in you." Guide us all as we seek to know ourselves and how to relate to each other in love. Amen.

SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE

Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

—Ephesians 4:15

This verse is sometimes quoted as an excuse by people who feel they must speak the truth to someone—and yet they fail miserably to do so *with love*. Instead, their thoughtless, harsh way of talking to others hurts feelings and leaves gaping wounds in their relationships. Paul isn't giving us license to do that. He's encouraging Christians to speak *truthfully and lovingly*, without intimidation or manipulation.

Sometimes, surely, “speaking the truth in love” involves confronting and rebuking when correction is needed. Jesus himself said as much in Revelation 3:19: “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline.” But Paul also cautioned young Timothy, whom he had appointed pastor of the church at Ephesus, “Do not rebuke an older man harsh-

ly, but exhort him as if he were your father” (1 Timothy 5:1).

Sometimes uncomfortable words have to be spoken, but they must be said in a loving way. If no one talks about an obvious problem, it will remain lurking in the background, like the proverbial “elephant in the room.” Such situations must be handled with love and care, asking for the Lord's guidance every step of the way.

Lord, we know how necessary love and sensitivity are when confronting others and asking for change. Make us guileless in our speaking. May we be loving, humble, respectful, and truthful, not hurtful or manipulative. In Jesus, Amen.

GREET ONE ANOTHER

Greet one another with a holy kiss.

—Romans 16:16

In Japan, on many roads leading to schools, there are signs that remind students, “Greetings are the foundation of our social life.” Sometimes I think signs like these would be helpful to children, parents, and others in nations everywhere.

Have you ever noticed how Paul’s letters usually begin and end with warm greetings? Romans 1:7 says, “To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.” And today’s verse offers general advice: “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” Paul encourages his readers with love and concern.

Louis Armstrong in his classic song “What A Wonderful World” says, “I see friends shaking hands, saying, ‘How do you do?’/They’re really saying, ‘I

love you.’” How true! And did you know that the common farewell in English, “Good-bye,” began many, many years ago as “God be with you”?

A smile with a sparkle in your eye tells a person, even before you open your mouth, that you are glad to see them. How much better than a dead look and no greeting at all!

In our culture, even if we do not greet people with “a holy kiss,” a friendly greeting and a smile go a long way to making someone’s day.

Have you blessed someone that way today?

O God, we love you because you first loved us. Thank you that the circle of your love ripples outward in goodwill to all whom we greet in love. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

OVERLOOKING AN INSULT

Fools show their annoyance at once, but the prudent overlook an insult.
—Proverbs 12:16

There's a French proverb that beautifully expresses what we need to learn today: "Write injuries in sand, kindnesses in marble." This is similar to the advice in our verse today from Proverbs: "Fools show their annoyance at once, but the prudent overlook an insult."

Many of Jesus' teachings show that he knew the wisdom of the Old Testament. For example, Psalm 37:11 says, "The meek will inherit the land," and in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus elaborates by saying, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). What's more, Jesus' famous instructions about turning the other cheek (Matthew 5:39) certainly have in mind the kind of offense mentioned in Proverbs 12:16, where the wise person overlooks an insult rather than becoming annoyed.

Life is full of irritations, and a fool shows his annoyance at once. He easily flies off the handle. A prudent person rides above the surge of irritation and overlooks the provocation. Having a calm spirit is so important in raising children, in working with others, in race relations, in marriage, in international relationships—in fact, in all of life.

Patience and prudence—wisdom—are important in all our dealings with others.

Have you asked God to guide you with his wisdom today? (See James 1:5.)

Lord, preserve us from knee-jerk reactions. Give us a calm spirit that trusts in you. Help us not to become easily annoyed. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

A FAITHFUL PERSON WHO CAN FIND?

Many claim to have unfailing love, but a faithful person who can find?
—Proverbs 20:6

An old Scottish folk song croons, “I will love thee ‘til all the seas run dry.” Sadly though, there’s a song by Robert Burns, an old-time bard of Scotland, in which he sings, “Wantonness has been my ruin,” lamenting that he has been led astray by lust, his life is a shambles because of promiscuous relationships, and he can’t break free.

The situation today is no different: many popular songs are about broken relationships and broken hearts, tales of deep sorrow and woe.

In light of all this, let’s think about the importance of faithfulness and unfailing love in all our relationships. Those characteristics—flowing from the character of God—are much more important than outward beauty or handsome features. “Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the

LORD is to be praised” (Proverbs 31:30). The same is true, of course, for a God-fearing man. And Peter notes that beauty comes from within—“the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit”; he also encourages respect and consideration for all (1 Peter 3:4-7).

Are you looking for a boyfriend or a girlfriend? Don’t just look at outward appearances. Think about what’s really important. Look for someone who loves the Lord. Here’s the key to joyful, lasting, fulfilling human relationships: God’s love, steady as a rock, in our hearts.

Lord God, thank you for your love and faithfulness and how you protect us each day. May we show your love in all our interactions with others. In Jesus, Amen.

EUODIA AND SYNTYCHE

I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.
—Philippians 4:2

Euodia and Syntyche were faithful Christian women who had worked with Paul to share the good news of Jesus and start the church in Philippi. But now, for some reason that is not explained to us, they were in disagreement about some aspect of church life.

Politics in churches and in society at large has a bad reputation. But not all politics is bad. Good politics involves compromise without betraying one's beliefs; bad politics tries to pull the rug from under the feet of one's opponents.

Some say the Bible is against compromise because it teaches moral absolutes. But how could Paul expect Euodia and Syntyche to agree with each other if they did not work out a compromise that honored their core beliefs in the Lord? They already agreed on basic prin-

ciples, but perhaps not on some details of applying them.

Sociologist Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*, explains that in many places churches have lost members during the past 50 years, but so have families, clubs, bowling leagues, and many voluntary organizations that expect members to make the effort to get along, to "be of the same mind." Even the politics necessary for public, democratic life has suffered, as people lose the ability to relate to others who aren't totally in agreement with them. How much is lost when we can only agree with ourselves, and like a turtle, draw into our shell!

Lord, give us the grace and flexibility, the patience and love to accept the give-and-take of life together. In Christ, Amen.

EARS THAT HEAR, EYES THAT SEE

The heavens declare the glory of God. . . . They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them.

—Psalm 19:1-3

Sam was so absorbed in his own thoughts that he didn't hear his wife talking to him. That is not just a husband-wife problem; it affects all humanity. Ages ago, God rebuked his people, saying, "Hear, you deaf; look, you blind, and see! . . . You have seen many things, but you pay no attention; your ears are open, but you do not listen" (Isaiah 42:18-20).

The heavens declare the glory of God in every language of humankind. But what if we don't listen? It's as bad as letting someone's words go in one ear and out the other or, worse, refusing to hear.

During the late 1800s people riding the new transcontinental railway on the Great Plains of America blasted away at herds of buffalo stretching as far as the eye could see, killing hundreds of thousands, leaving

the corpses to rot in the sun. Why would they do such an outrageous thing, amounting to a rape of nature? Nothing restrained them because they failed to see in those creatures the majesty of their Creator.

We've learned a few things about ecology since then. But we still haven't got it right. There's still a widespread blindness and deafness about nature: for example, looking for microscopic life on Mars (a worthwhile scientific effort) but not seeing the Source of all life. Do you see the glory of God that is plainly visible throughout the universe?

Lord, help us see and hear what nature is saying. Move us to understand that you call us to care for your creation, for the benefit of all. Amen.

NOT LIFTING A FINGER TO HELP

"Woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them."
—Luke 11:46

In recent years Japan has been emerging from a long feudal period in its history. Under feudalism, the layers of society were strictly held in check by authority. It is no exaggeration that among the passing generation of Japanese men, some would sit cross-legged like a samurai warrior before his peasant retainer, barking out harsh commands to their wives: "Tea! Tobacco!" In Japan today, many young women don't like the idea of waiting hand-and-foot on a tyrant, preferring not to get married rather than to suffer such oppression.

The experts of the law in Jesus' day, as religious teachers, were similarly situated at the top of Jewish society. They had the power, by their authoritative interpretations, to make people groan under the burden of

senseless legalistic regulations, enslaving people to the law.

In family life today, people still must figure out a balanced, fair division of labor in a busy household: earning a salary, raising children, handling house-keeping chores, getting enough rest. We do well to remember Jesus' criticism of legal experts who loaded people down with burdens, not lifting a finger to help. Let's also remember Paul's words in Galatians 6:2: "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

Lord Jesus, we know that you came to serve. Give shape to our daily lives and relationships; infuse them with an attitude of service as we reflect on all you have taught. Amen.

GRUFF WORDS FROM A PROPHET OF GOD

Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. . . . Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. —James 4:8-10

Martin Luther struggled to understand the letter of James because he thought it contradicted Paul's letters. Of course, that was not the case. James can be off-putting in our day too, because of his gruff commands. But sometimes we can be too delicate, saying that God "suggests" ideas for our consideration, as if he were a shop-keeper eager to please a customer.

We need to accept James for who he is—a New Testament prophet inspired by the same Spirit as the Old Testament prophets and Jesus himself. Then we will find treasures in his brief letter that will strengthen our relationships with God and with others.

Sitting under James's teaching is like drinking from a fire hose. One relevant theme after another gushes forth: overcom-

ing troubles in life, avoiding hypocrisy in our faith, taming the tongue, putting an end to quarreling, ensuring healthy employer-employee relationships, bringing peace where there has been strife and disorder.

The letter of James is like a summary of the Old Testament Law and the Prophets, Proverbs, and the New Testament Gospels. Ponder its unforgettable words in your heart! James is a good place to continue the lifelong quest of learning to relate to others.

Lord our God, we ask that you lift us up, for we have stumbled in so many ways. Lead us by your Spirit in the way everlasting, through Jesus. Amen.

THE CREATION SONG

"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? . . . Who laid its cornerstone—while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?"
—Job 38:4-7

My mother always sang. Whether she was sweeping the floor or washing dishes, she was always singing or humming a tune. One of my last memories of her was that we sang a song together that she had taught me years earlier, a song expressing her assurance that in Jesus the gates of heaven were open for her.

Music and song are an integral part of our lives—whether we can sing with the voice of an angel or scarcely carry a tune. According to God's Word, music and song have been with us since the creation of the world. Genesis 1, the story of creation, is written in verse, like a poem or song. I like to think of the angels joining in with God as they sang this refrain: "It is good; it is very good!"

This creation song, along with many others, has been incorpo-

rated into God's Word to us. In addition to all the songs in the book of Psalms there are also many other songs and references to singing tucked away in God's Word. Many of those passages comfort and encourage us. But, most of all, they point us to the one true God, our Creator and Redeemer, who has a plan for our lives.

May we be encouraged to join with the angels and sing God's praises today and every day.

Do you have song you'd like to sing to the Lord today? Be sure to share it with someone!

Dear Lord, open our eyes to your greatness and your love so that we may praise you every day of our lives. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

A SAD SONG WITH A RAY OF HOPE

"Cursed is the ground because of you. . . . Dust you are and to dust you will return."
—Genesis 3:17-19

How radically the song about creation in Genesis has changed—from “very good” to “cursed.” What has happened?

Genesis 2 retells the creation story with a special emphasis on man and woman as the pinnacle of God’s creation. But trouble entered Paradise. Satan, who once belonged to the angelic beings who worshiped the Creator, had foolishly, pridefully, tried to take God’s place. From that moment on the war between good and evil was on, and God ousted Satan from his presence (see Revelation 12).

Satan tempted Adam and Eve to disobey God, and by their disobedience they brought destruction and death to God’s amazing creation. This sad song of curses sums up the drastic results of human disobedience.

Yet all was not lost—not then and not now. God’s frightening

song shines a ray of hope. Eve’s offspring would one day crush the head of the serpent. And that day came when Jesus, born of Mary, triumphed over Satan and paid the price to redeem us from the curse of sin and death. Through his death on a cross for us and by his resurrection, Jesus brought us victory over sin, death, and Satan.

Today we can still say, “It is good,” and we can sing a song of redemption, because God is good.

We thank you, Lord God, that although we live in a sinful world that tries to crush us, we have hope because the final victory is promised through the finished work of Jesus, our Savior. In his name we pray. Amen.

THE SINGING CONTINUES

Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD: "I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted."
—Exodus 15:1

In Exodus 1 we see some of the radical effects of sin. God's people became slaves in Egypt. Their lives became "bitter with harsh labor," and "the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly" (Exodus 1:14). But God set his people free from slavery on the night of the first Passover, redeeming them from oppression (see Exodus 12-13).

Exodus 15 records a glorious song in which the Israelites praise God for their deliverance. This is a song about God's miraculous deeds! At least a dozen times in the first 12 verses alone God's name is mentioned! God, the Creator and Redeemer of this world, will accomplish his goal to redeem his people and restore the world he has made for his glory. The song closes with these words: "The LORD reigns for ever and ever."

Just as all the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, the Bible teaches us that we are all slaves to sin. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Yet today we have a reason to sing! Jesus Christ has delivered us from sin by his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead.

We too should praise God for his deliverance. If we confess Jesus Christ as our Savior, then one day we will sing, along with all who have been redeemed, "the song of God's servant Moses and of the Lamb" (Revelation 15:3). What a day that will be!

Lord, we will sing to you,
for you are highly exalted.
You are our strength and
our defense; you are our
salvation. Praise be to your
name. Amen.

MORE SAD SONGS

David took up this lament concerning Saul and his son Jonathan.

—2 Samuel 1:17

There's an old song that says, "Sad movies always make me cry." The effects of sin and evil had the same impact on one of the greatest musicians in the Bible.

Psalm 23, the most well-known of David's songs, may have been written early in his life. But his first recorded song is this lament in 2 Samuel 1. It is the heart cry of David over King Saul and his son Jonathan, who died in a battle with Israel's enemy, the Philistines.

In 2 Samuel 3:33-34 we find another sad song of David, a lament over the death of his friend Abner. Such songs help us learn to keep talking with God even though our lives may seem to be falling apart and we feel as if God has abandoned us. They remind us that although our lives are constantly threatened by sickness, pain, and death,

nevertheless God has promised victory through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

It is good to know that in times of chaos, distress, and sadness, God hears us, and in his time he will set our wrongs right again. Until then, we need to cling to his Word and the many promises it contains. We need to listen to his words of assurance: "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5; see Deuteronomy 31:6; Joshua 1:5).

Lord, there are many times in life when we feel as if the bottom has fallen out and we are left gasping. Thank you that you never turn away from our heartfelt cries. Thank you for sending your Spirit to be our constant comfort in distress. Amen.

JONAH'S PRAYER SONG

"In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me."

—Jonah 2:2

The seaweed wrapped around Jonah, dragging him down, threatening to drown him in a watery grave. Suddenly a large fish swallowed him. Admittedly, the belly of the fish was a precarious place to be, but it was also an act of grace. God had placed him there. I'm not sure Jonah saw it that way—certainly not right away. But his prayer consists of many parts of songs he knew well from the Psalms, the song book of God's people.

When I was going through a crisis, I said to a friend, "I feel like I am being swallowed up like Jonah." The next day my friend sent an email with a picture of Jonah in a smiling whale and this comment, "Like Jonah, you need to realize this is the best place for you to be right now." How does one come to that realization?

Are you going through a time of crisis? Read the psalms and

note how the authors cry out to God. Meditate on comforting hymns like "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" or "Great is Thy Faithfulness," until the healing streams of God's love restore your soul. Then you too will echo Jonah's song of thanksgiving: "Salvation comes from the LORD."

Jesus compares Jonah's time in the fish to the time between his own death and resurrection. Only because of what Jesus did can we sing, "Salvation comes from the LORD."

Thank you, Lord, for songs based on your Word that have found a place in our hearts and have given us a reservoir of grace. Help us to focus on you when we feel swallowed up by life. Amen.

A WELL THAT BRINGS JOY

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

—Isaiah 12:3

It was the fourth year of drought in central California; farmers were challenged daily by the shortage of water. A friend took me to see a well he was having dug to water 40 acres of almond trees. The price? More than \$200,000! Wow! “Yes,” he said, “that’s a steep price, but it’s worth it.”

Long ago Isaiah spoke to God’s people about a different shortage—namely, their lack of faithful obedience to God. The Holy One, he said, would not endure such disobedience. The result would be the destruction of God’s people by their enemies. But the beautiful song of Isaiah 12 speaks of a well of salvation that would once again fill God’s people with joy.

John 4 relates the story of Jesus at a well, where he met someone who needed the water that only he could give—the water of eter-

nal life. He told the Samaritan woman who he was, and she believed. The price God paid to take away her sin and ours was far greater than \$200,000. Rather, “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). That’s what Jesus meant when he said, “Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst.”

Have you been refreshed by the well of God’s abounding grace?

Father, your love is so deep and vast. You gave your only Son for us. We can’t begin to understand your amazing grace. But we know that the death of Jesus on the cross paid the price for our sins. Thank you! Amen.

A SONG OF COMFORT

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

—Isaiah 40:1

Each of us needs a healthy dose of comfort from time to time. The child at play who trips and scrapes her knee badly needs comfort from a parent or other caregiver. The young man or woman at college with its unfamiliar surroundings needs someone to talk to. Consider also the young couple whose first child was stillborn, the middle-aged couple whose son died in an accident, and the elderly man whose wife of 60 years is slipping away because of Alzheimer's. Who will comfort them?

Thank God that there is good news in Isaiah's song. God himself says, "Comfort, comfort my people. . . . Speak tenderly. . . ."

When we need comfort, we must remember, first, that God is the Sovereign Lord. He will meet us in every situation with his powerful arm. As an old

hymn puts it, "Oh, let me not forget that, though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the Ruler yet." Never forget it! This is our Father's world.

Second, our Father is a loving, compassionate God. No matter what adversities you may be going through today, you can take comfort. Like a shepherd with his sheep, God carries us close to his heart. Remember Jesus' parting words: "I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

Thank you, Lord, that you are our powerful God of comfort. Even as you carry us close to your heart, so too may we joyfully carry each other's burdens as we live for you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

A SONG OF HOPE

Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength.

—Isaiah 40:31

Waiting can be filled with eager anticipation—children waiting for Christmas; teens waiting to get their driver's license; adults waiting with joy for their wedding day or for the arrival of their first child.

There is also a more difficult side to waiting. Parents wait anxiously for a medical assessment after their child has had an accident. When we have lost a job, or when a spouse is critically ill, we wait with heavy hearts for an indication that God is watching over us and providing for us in our need.

Isaiah 40 begins with words of comfort and ends with words of hope. Those who wait on the Lord and put their hope in him will be renewed; “they will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

As wonderful as these promises are, we can all testify that we long for our days of waiting to be over as our need for comfort continues. Is our hope in the Lord in vain? Far from it! Jesus, the Lamb of God, is on the throne. We are called to declare the good news that Jesus has come and is coming again. Until that day we are called to join with him in absorbing the suffering of the world. And we pray daily for God's kingdom to come and his will to be done.

Lord, our lives are filled with waiting. Sometimes we anticipate with joy; sometimes we dread waking to another day. May our hope always be in you, our King who has come and is coming again. In your name, Amen.

PREPARING TO PRAISE

Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD.

—Psalm 150:6

In 1 Chronicles 22 we learn that King David was not allowed to build the temple for God in Jerusalem because he had been involved in too much war and bloodshed. Yet he did an enormous amount of work to enable his son Solomon, the next king, to succeed in that task. David provided huge amounts of gold and silver as well as wood and stone. He also prepared workers to build the temple.

King David, who in some Bible translations is called “Israel’s singer of songs” and “the sweet psalmist of Israel” (2 Samuel 23:1), wanted to make sure that God’s people would continue to worship the Lord in song once the temple was built. So he appointed 4,000 Levites to praise the Lord, of which 288 were skilled in the use of musical instruments.

Churches around the world carry out this tradition today as they gather to worship God. Some use wonderful organs and skilled organists; others use electronic keyboards, guitars, and drums; and still others prefer to use only voices to worship God. Whatever means you use, let your praise be heartfelt and filled with joy and sincerity.

Because God is worthy of all praise, in our worship we are called to join in, not leaving music only to the professionals. Nor should we confine it to church services one day a week. Rather, “Let everything that has breath praise the LORD.”

Father God, may we lift up our hearts in praise to you today, for you are worthy to receive “honor and glory and praise!” (Revelation 5:12). Amen.

WHEN SHOULD WE CELEBRATE?

All the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.

—Ezra 3:11

My son and daughter-in-law recently celebrated the 100th day of their daughter's life, an important custom in the Korean culture.

For many of us, life is full of celebrations. Every year we celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays. We also celebrate important milestones, such as graduating, coming of age, getting a promotion or a pay raise, or breaking ground for a new building project.

God's people had returned to their own land after seventy years of exile. They had worked hard to prepare for rebuilding the temple of the Lord. And when they completed the foundation for the new temple, it was time to celebrate! Ezra writes that "with praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD."

What can you celebrate today? Perhaps you just learned to ride your bicycle. Maybe you received a letter of acceptance into college. Have you just finished eating a delicious meal? God's Word says, "Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). Why not celebrate as Ezra and the people of God did by shouting out your praises to the Lord? As the Bible also teaches, "Rejoice in the Lord always" (Philippians 4:4).

Lord, you remind us in your Word that because of all that Christ Jesus has done for us, we can give thanks in all circumstances. May our songs of praise and all our celebrations be acceptable to you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

BATTLE SONGS

Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the LORD and to praise him for the splendor of his holiness.
—2 Chronicles 20:21

Many nations have favorite songs celebrating their underdog victories over enemies who were bent on conquest or oppression. In 2 Chronicles 20 we have a fascinating account of how God protected his people from a vast enemy army.

King Jehoshaphat learned that a huge army from neighboring lands was coming to attack Judah and Jerusalem. Knowing that his army had no power to stand against them, he cried out to the Lord, “We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.” God sent a message: “Do not be afraid or discouraged. . . . For the battle is not yours, but God’s.” And in faith the king marched out to face the enemy, calling the people to trust and praise the Lord, saying, “Give thanks to the LORD, for his love endures forever.”

While there may be many military dangers around the world today, we may also face the threat of personal challenges. How can we get food for tomorrow? How can I fight my addiction? How can we fight the cancer that is destroying my loved one?

By his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead, King Jesus has won the greatest battle facing each of us—the battle against sin and death. Cry out to him in faith, “Lord, we do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.” Then live by God’s Word and praise his name, trusting that he will supply what you need, either in this life or the next.

Lord, help us to follow you in faith, knowing you are with us. Thank you for your victory. We praise your name! Amen.

GARMENTS OF PRAISE

I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation. . . . —Isaiah 61:10

Much of Isaiah's prophecy predicts the destruction of God's people because of their sin. But the final section, beginning with chapter 60, calls on the people to wake up to their God-given glory so that they can display God's splendor to others. The Spirit tells Isaiah to put the oil of joy on God's people and give them a garment of praise.

How could such a turn of events be possible for God's people who were exiles, miserable slaves in a foreign land? Look closely at today's theme verse. God's people can praise him because he has already clothed someone with salvation and a robe of righteousness.

In the New Testament Jesus reads from Isaiah 61 as he preaches for the first time in his hometown, Nazareth. Then he says, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke

4:18-21). The New Testament also states that by faith in Jesus we are clothed with Christ (Galatians 3:27). And later we are challenged with these words: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4).

Let's put on garments of praise today. Let's wake up to the glory and goodness God has given us through salvation in Christ Jesus and live so that others may be drawn to him as their Lord and Savior.

Compassionate Lord Jesus, thank you for restoring us as your daughters and sons. May we joyfully praise your name and share your good news with others in response to your great love. In your name we pray. Amen.

THE DAY THE MUSIC STOPPED

The young men have stopped their music. Joy is gone from our hearts. . . .
—Lamentations 5:14-15

Sometimes we can feel as if nothing will ever again be right in our lives. We feel beaten down and afraid to hope. Or perhaps we know that a better day is coming, and yet we are filled with despair. The music has stopped!

The book of Lamentations is a compilation of funeral songs for Jerusalem and its people after the city was destroyed by Babylon. Here the prophet Jeremiah confesses God's sovereignty and justice, but he also can't shake off the feeling of rejection. He cries out, "Why do you forsake us so long?"

If that is how you feel today, please know that Jesus understands. He was mocked by his enemies as he hung dying on the cross. He was forsaken by his closest friends. He even cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

(Mark 15:34). But God raised him from the grave and "gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11).

Because Jeremiah looked ahead to God's promise of deliverance, he could sing with words of faith that have given believers hope through the ages: "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22-23).

"Great is thy faithfulness,
O God my Father. . . .
Morning by morning new
mercies I see." Thank you,
Lord! Amen.

ELIZABETH'S SONG

Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you. . ."

—Luke 1:41-42

Angels and songs are a part of many major events in the Old Testament. And as the New Testament continues with the story of God's great faithfulness and the gift of salvation through his Son, we find angels and songs in abundance. The angel Gabriel came to Zechariah to announce the amazing birth of his son, John; then six months later, he visited Mary, a virgin, with the astounding news that she would give birth to the Son of God, in the flesh!

When Mary went to visit Elizabeth, the wife of Zechariah, the baby in Elizabeth's womb started doing somersaults, and Elizabeth broke out in a Spirit-led song of blessing and praise.

Elizabeth's song begins by honoring Mary's role in the birth of Jesus. Then she acknowledges Mary's baby as her Lord. And she concludes by recognizing

with praise the blessing that comes from believing in the Lord's promises and his great faithfulness.

God also speaks to each of us through his Word and Spirit. Ask him to make you more aware of how he is speaking all around you. As you respond with obedience to all you hear and see, you too will rejoice and sing praise to the One who is continuing the good work of salvation that he began long ago. You can be "confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion" (Philippians 1:6).

Lord, help us to express our joy and love for you in praise each day. Help us to see daily how you are working out our salvation in Christ Jesus. In your powerful name. Amen.

MARY'S SONG

"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."
—Luke 1:46-47

One of the most beautiful songs in the Bible is the one Mary sings as she reflects on God's faithful work and prepares to become the mother of the promised Savior. Though she recognizes that all generations will call her blessed, she acknowledges with humility that all of this will take place only through "the Mighty One [who] has done great things . . .—holy is his name." She goes on to exclaim about God's mercy, his mighty acts, his compassion for the needy, and his faithfulness through all generations.

God, in his mercy, lifts up the humble such as Mary out of sheer grace. Mary glorifies and rejoices in the Lord because through the child she will bear, Jesus, God will bring salvation from sin.

Many of our songs today—even our Christian songs—focus

more on us: what we do, what we need, and how we act. It's important that we also focus on God, our Creator, Sustainer, and Savior—and all that he has done for us.

I love some old songs that proclaim "How Great Thou Art!" and "Great Is Thy Faithfulness." And some contemporary songs remind us that God is a "Good, Good Father" and that Christ alone is our "Cornerstone."

That's who the Lord is. And he loves you and me. Let's rejoice in that today!

Lord God, thank you for Mary's song. Thank you for the reminder that it's all about you. We glorify and praise you for your great mercy to us. Holy is your name. Amen.

A LONG-AWAITED SONG

Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel. . . ." —Luke 1:67-68

Zechariah had waited nine long months to sing this song. When God had first promised a son to this aging couple, Zechariah couldn't believe it. But as he saw the evidence growing in Elizabeth's womb, he knew it was indeed true. God was faithful to his word!

But Zechariah couldn't tell anyone, not even on the day his son was born. Then eight days later, when the baby was circumcised and Zechariah made clear that the child's name was John, as the angel had said, Zechariah was able to speak again—and he praised the Lord with this beautiful song.

The first part of this song tells us of the great mission that God would accomplish through his Son, Jesus, the Savior. Jesus came into the world to redeem sinners so that they might serve the Lord faithfully.

Then, in the second part of his song, Zechariah described the mission that his son was born for. John would be the prophet who would prepare the way for Jesus, the Savior, who would bring light to this dark world.

We too have a mission in this world. Today we are called to bring the light of Jesus to others. We must be agents of peace in a world torn apart by sin. And by the Spirit of God living in us, we can carry out this work in Jesus' name!

Lord Jesus, pour out your Holy Spirit on us. Make us strong in you so that we will carry on the great mission to which you have called us. Help us to tell others of you, the Savior of the world. In your name we pray. Amen.

THE ANGELS' SONG

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

On the night Jesus was born, shepherds near Bethlehem were watching their sheep. Suddenly an angel told them good news: the Savior of the world had been born! Then the angel was joined by a great chorus of angels, whose song has echoed throughout history ever since: "Glory to God in the highest heaven. . . ."

The coming of Jesus, the Savior, is the fulfillment of all of God's promises. The Bible says, "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known" (John 1:18). All praise belongs to God for what he has done.

The angels also sang, "And on earth peace. . . ." Our world is torn apart by warfare among nations and strife between people. We desperately need peace. Only through Christ

will true peace come on earth. We read in Colossians 1:19-20, "For God was pleased . . . to reconcile to himself all things . . . by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."

In *The Purpose Driven Life* Rick Warren made a statement that has stuck with me over the years: "It's not about you. . . . It's all about God." The angels understood that when they sang the closing line of their song: ". . . to those on whom his favor rests." Our salvation, from beginning to end, is the gracious work of God.

We give you all glory, Lord God, for your great salvation. May we, like the shepherds of old, waste no time in acknowledging you as our Savior and Lord. In your name we pray. Amen.

THE SONG OF THE SHEPHERDS

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen. . . .
—Luke 2:20

We are not told the content of the shepherds' praise as they returned to their fields that night long ago. But let me make a few suggestions.

Perhaps their song recalled the angels' chorus: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14). Surely the shepherds had just experienced the favor of the Lord. Perhaps as they recalled the angel's words "Do not be afraid," as well as the light of God's glory over the fields of Bethlehem, they also had new insight into Psalm 27: "The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?" This event may also have given new meaning to the words of Psalm 23: "The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing."

The birth of Jesus, the Son of God, continues to give us cause

for rejoicing and singing. He is still the only sure foundation that gives us confidence today and for the future.

So it's important that we not keep quiet. It's important that we rejoice as we tell others of Jesus, the Prince of Peace and the Redeemer of the world.

How have you shared this good news lately?

We thank you, heavenly Father, that in your great mercy and love you not only revealed yourself to us but also gave your only Son for us. May we join our voices with those of the shepherds not only in singing your praises but also in telling others of your amazing grace and salvation. In Jesus our Savior's name, Amen.

THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME

Simeon . . . praised God, saying, "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised. . . ."
—Luke 2:28-29

Traditionally Simeon is pictured as an aged man. While the Bible doesn't actually say he is old, it does imply he has been waiting a long time for God's promised Messiah, and he is clearly told that he will not die before seeing this child. So Simeon is probably quite old.

What is more important than Simeon's age is his song of praise. "Moved by the Spirit," he is in the temple when Mary and Joseph bring Jesus there to have him consecrated to the Lord. Then Simeon takes the child in his arms, praising God and declaring blessing and hope for all peoples.

First, Simeon claims the promises of God by faith. Imagine looking at this young child and trusting that he is indeed the Lord's Messiah. Simeon's song goes on to say that knowing Christ as Lord enables us to

have peace with God. Finally, Simeon's song is filled with hope because he can see the all-encompassing work of God's great salvation in Christ for people of all nations.

Like Simeon, we too can look forward with hope. If you have truly trusted Jesus as your Savior, then you know that the best is yet to come. One day, like Simeon, you too will see Jesus face to face.

Do we need any more reason to sing?

Lord God, by faith we claim your promise of salvation in Christ. May our lives reflect your light and your glory to everyone around us. Thank you for the hope that one day we will see you face to face. Amen.

BORN TO BE A KING

He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.

—1 Timothy 3:16

The short song found in today's verses was probably part of a hymn in the first-century church. It reminds us of an important fact: Jesus was born to be a king. The day he was sentenced to die Jesus told Pilate, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me" (John 18:37).

Too often we stop singing about Jesus' birth too quickly. We celebrate Christ's birth on Christmas day, but then we set Jesus aside like the Christmas decorations. It's safe and easy to celebrate a baby in a manger, but it can be challenging to carry Christ's message into the world throughout the year.

The song in Paul's letter to Timothy teaches that Jesus, who came to earth in the flesh,

proved the truth of all he said and did. (He accomplished that by dying on a cross and rising from the dead to rescue us from sin and death.) That's good news, and there is more. After Jesus rose from death, he ascended to heaven. "All authority in heaven and on earth" now belongs to him (Matthew 28:18). Jesus was born not just to be a king, but to be the King of Glory.

Have you let Jesus become the song of your life?

Thank you, Father, that we are reminded of the great mystery you have revealed to us in Jesus. Thank you for your love that sent him to become our Savior, Lord, and King. In his name we pray. Amen.

“HIS LOVE NEVER QUILTS”

When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.
—Matthew 26:30

When Jesus was born, singing was everywhere. Angels burst into song, and shepherds near Bethlehem joined in. The Savior had come to redeem the world from sin and suffering!

In our reading today we find that Jesus sang a hymn with his disciples as they were finishing the Passover meal (see Matthew 26:17). Then, as they walked to Gethsemane, he told his followers they would all fall away and he would be struck down. He was predicting that he would soon be arrested and sentenced to die. But then he said, “After I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.”

How could Jesus be so confident of the outcome? The key is probably in the hymn they had sung. It was likely the song that was traditionally sung after the Passover meal: Psalm 136, known as the Great Hallel. This

psalm acknowledges God as Creator of all and as his people’s Redeemer. It rehearses God’s saving acts in the Old Testament and recalls that the Lord provides for us always.

I like Eugene Peterson’s rendition of Psalm 136:23-26 in *The Message*:

“God remembered us when we were down, *His love never quits*. Rescued us from the trampling boot, *His love never quits*. Takes care of everyone in time of need, *His love never quits*. Thank God, who did it all! *His love never quits!*”

Thank you, Jesus, for dying and rising to new life for our sake. May we live confidently today, knowing that your love never fails. In your name we pray. Amen.

WHAT A TIME FOR SINGING!

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God. . . .
—Acts 16:25

A strange thing happened on the way to a prayer meeting; Paul and his traveling companions were met by a slave girl “who had a spirit by which she predicted the future.” For several days she followed Paul, disrupting his attempts to spread the good news of Jesus in Philippi. When Paul cast out the evil spirit that controlled her, her owners got upset because they could no longer use her to make money. So they dragged Paul and Silas to court, where they were charged with causing a disturbance. The magistrates ordered them to be stripped, beaten, and sent to jail.

Locked securely in an inner cell, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God around midnight. We do not know what they sang, but we are told that “the other prisoners were listening to them.”

Then, when an earthquake shook open all the prison doors and loosed everyone’s chains, no one escaped. The jailer, who was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had gone, rushed in and instead found new life in Christ as Paul and Silas shared the good news.

When you find yourself faced with difficulties, consider the response of Paul and Silas and ask yourself, “Do my prayers and songs reflect the awesome grace of God? Will people be moved to ask, ‘What must I do to be saved?’”

Lord, when things go wrong in our lives, guide us to turn to you in prayer and singing so that others will come to know the One who has opened the way to abundant and eternal life. Amen.

SINGING EVERY DAY

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

The apostle Paul's letter to the Colossians covers some significant topics: prayer, the person and work of Jesus, and the church. Paul also encourages his readers to show evidence that they are alive in Christ as they "teach and help one another along the right road with . . . psalms and hymns and Christian songs, singing God's praises with joyful hearts" (J.B. Phillips translation).

Singing was important to God's people in ancient times, and it is still very important today. How can you use singing to make your own life or that of others around you rich in true wisdom today?

I am reminded of a family in Africa with whom I was privileged to stay. The mother and father led their three little children in singing two or three songs after every meal. These

songs brought the teachings of Christ to live in their hearts. You might choose to play Christian music on your car radio or iPod. Or perhaps you might quietly sing a hymn to encourage a friend who is sick.

Take a moment today to think of how you can use songs to encourage someone in their walk with the Lord. Be reminded of how often the words of a song have encouraged you to walk more closely with God during times of struggle, doubt, or temptation.

Dear Lord, thank you for the gift of music. Thank you for giving us songs to express our gratitude to you every day. In your name we pray. Amen.

“YOU NEVER LET GO”

God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”

—Hebrews 13:5

A few years ago my young grandson introduced me to the Matt Redman song “You Never Let Go.” He sang it enthusiastically all the way to church. I have come to appreciate this song as a helpful reflection of what God says in his Word.

Today’s verses from Hebrews are based on two Old Testament Scriptures. In Deuteronomy 31:6 Moses offers great encouragement to God’s people. And in Psalm 118:6-7 the writer states with confidence that when the Lord is your helper, there is no need to fear. Later the psalmist also says, “The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation” (118:14).

These texts are often a comfort to believers facing times of crisis. Knowing the assurance of God’s presence, we are comforted and filled with hope. We

know that God is always with us and will never leave or forsake us.

But even in good times we face challenges. The first part of our passage today reminds us to love “one another as brothers and sisters.” We are urged to “show hospitality to strangers.” We are called to remember people who are in prison and those who are mistreated. Our marriages are to be honorable, and we are to be content with what we have. These are not easy tasks! The only way we can serve God with confidence is by remembering that our Lord Jesus died for us so that we can joyfully live for him.

Dear Lord, thank you that “you never let go, through the calm and through the storm.” Thank you, Jesus. In your name, Amen.

A PUZZLE AND A SONG

*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
... To him be the glory forever! Amen.* —Romans 11:33-36

I enjoy the challenge of putting together a 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle. Some people get the daily newspaper just to do the crossword puzzle or the Sudoku. But sometimes our puzzles can end up puzzling us. That's how it was for the apostle Paul.

Paul wrestled with a very personal problem. By God's grace he had come to know Jesus as his Savior. As he went about doing his missionary work, many Gentiles came to faith in Jesus as Lord. But many of his own Jewish people rejected Jesus. It was mind boggling to him. Were they not God's special people chosen to share God's love with the world? Nevertheless, Paul was so confident of God's great mercy that he broke into song.

Paul confesses that we can never fully grasp God's eternal plan. Our efforts to understand

God, define him, or reduce him to our level will ultimately fail. God owes us no explanation; nor is he accountable to us—for he is God.

There is something we can do—in fact, two things. First, Paul implies that we should keep praising God because all glory belongs to him forever. Then Paul goes on to say that the only reasonable response to all this is to offer ourselves in complete service to God and to be completely available for his use.

Are we doing that?

Lord, often we are as puzzled as Paul about the way you deal with us. Even so, may we stand in awe of your amazing grace and respond to you with songs of praise and acts of service. Amen.

FATHER, MAKE US ONE

With one mind and one voice [may] you . . . glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
—Romans 15:6

One of the greatest obstacles to the spread of the gospel today is divisiveness in the church. This problem is not new, but that doesn't make it any less serious. Paul indicates that the division between Jew and Gentile followers of Jesus was problematic in the early church.

Though we need not agree about everything, the Bible emphasizes that followers of Jesus Christ should demonstrate unity. We can achieve this by following the example of Jesus as we serve one another. We should pray that God will give us "the same attitude of mind toward each other that Jesus Christ had." We should also praise God for the privilege of Christian relationships. This will bring glory to God.

Paul instructs his readers to praise, rejoice, and sing hymns to express their unity and to

glorify God for his mercies. Shouldn't we who have received God's great salvation in the one Savior, Jesus Christ, lift up our voices to praise him in unity?

One of my great privileges has been to worship God with sisters and brothers in many different lands. Though often I cannot understand the words being sung, I know we are one in the Spirit and in the Lord. It thrills my heart to sing praises to God with these believers because I know the power of the Holy Spirit is there with us as we worship our Savior, Jesus, together.

In what ways do you strive for unity with other believers?

Father, make us one. Unite us so that the world may know you have sent Jesus, the Savior. Amen.

WORSHIP THE LORD

Day and night they never stop saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty,' who was, and is, and is to come."

—Revelation 4:8

The apostle John wrote this letter to the churches in Asia Minor in a time of great crisis. Persecution had greatly increased among first-century Christians.

John was banished to the island of Patmos for refusing to worship the Roman emperor as Lord. From there he sent this letter describing a vision from God. He challenged his readers to see that what they were experiencing was a prelude to the joyful celebration that would take place when the Lord returns.

By faith we too must see what is going on in the world. By faith we must see that the kingdom of God has come because Jesus has come. By faith we can serve him with joy every day.

John invites us to worship God in song, joining with the four

living creatures near the throne, saying, "'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty,' who was, and is, and is to come."

Whenever we worship God, we are invited to sing with these creatures that our God is eternal and absolutely pure. No matter what season of life we are in, or what our circumstances may be, and no matter who the shakers and movers in our world appear to be, we too can sing, "Our God reigns! He is in control!" Because of Jesus we may joyfully approach his throne and worship him today.

You are holy, Lord God Almighty. We bow before you, the one who was and is and is to come. We thank you that our times are in your hands. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WORSHIP THE ONE WHO IS WORTHY

"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"

—Revelation 5:12

Bible scholars tell us that whenever a Roman emperor entered a city, the citizens shouted, "Worthy!" The apostle John, who had been exiled because he confessed Jesus as Lord, knew that only Jesus was worthy—not the emperor.

Today we are invited to see with spiritual eyes what John saw happening in heaven. We are summoned to join with the multitude of angels and other creatures in singing that the Lord is worthy.

God is worthy of all our praise and honor because he is the Creator and Savior. We owe every breath to the One who has made us, and we have new life, purchased by the blood of Christ, because he was slain for our sake.

Our Lord Jesus, the Lamb who was slain, is worthy to open the

scroll of history (explained in Rev. 6-9). The One who died on the cross and rose from the dead, giving us new life in order to serve and rule with him, is the One who now reigns. All authority in heaven and on earth belongs to him, and his kingdom will never end.

Shall we lift up our voices and sing with all the creatures of our God and King? "To him . . . be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever! . . . Amen."

We worship you, Lord, our Creator, Sustainer, Savior, and King. We bow before you and join our voices in praise as we sing: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain." To you be all glory and praise! Amen.

BY THE WORD OF OUR TESTIMONY

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

Our reading today gives us a powerful reminder that there is a great spiritual battle going on: the war against sin and Satan. The good news of God's Word in Revelation 12 is that we will win the battle. We will triumph because God has made our salvation secure in Christ, and in his strength, by the power of his Spirit, he will see us through.

Violence and destruction in the world tempt us to despair. But God's Word assures us we will prevail. How? First, we will triumph by the blood of the Lamb. As Ephesians 1:7-8 tells us, "In [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavishes on us." Because Jesus has dealt with sin, in one sense the war is over.

But the battle will continue until the end of time. So we are

called to be victorious by our testimony. By our words and lives we must consistently declare the truth that Jesus is Lord.

This will never be easy. In fact, we must be willing to sacrifice our lives, even as Jesus did. Yet, even in the face of death we can have hope, for we know that Jesus has defeated our final enemy, death itself: "Death has been swallowed up in victory" (1 Corinthians 15:54).

In what ways can you stand firm in the battle against sin and the devil today? (See Ephesians 6:10-18.)

Dear Lord, you have won the battle of sin on the cross. May we always stand firm and give ourselves fully to the work of your kingdom. Amen.

WORSHIP THE ONE WHO IS JUST

*"Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty.
Just and true are your ways, King of the nations."*

—Revelation 15:3

"That's not fair!" exclaimed the little girl. How early in life we sense when the scales tip in someone else's favor! We all want justice.

The songs in Revelation 15 and 16 tell us that God is holy and just in all his ways. Interestingly, they are found in two chapters that speak about punishment.

Many people relegate God's wrath to the Old Testament and suggest that the New Testament pictures only a God of love. Would it surprise you that every book of the New Testament speaks of God's wrath? It is precisely because God is holy and just in all his ways that he opposes evil.

John expresses clearly that God's wrath is awful. That's the bad news. The good news, though, is that because God is perfectly just, he is also amazingly merci-

ful. In Jesus, justice and mercy work together to provide us a way out of the punishment for our sin.

John also wrote, "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). No one can run from God's judgment; but everyone is welcome to run to Jesus and find in him the mercy of God that can save us from sin.

That's the good news. Will you run to him today?

Lord Jesus, Savior of the world, may we hide ourselves in you today by repenting of our sins and accepting the gracious offer of your forgiveness and new life. In your merciful name, Amen.

WORSHIP THE COMING KING

"Look, I am coming soon! . . . I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End."

—Revelation 22:12-13

In the last chapter of Revelation, Jesus tells us three times, "I am coming soon." His work as the crucified and risen Lord will be completed; all things will be restored; and he will reign as King of kings forever.

When that happens, everything will once again be good. Revelation 21:1-4 tells us, "I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. . . . And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people. . . . 'There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'"

Jesus also invites us to come to him. He says, "Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life."

Wherever you are today, and whoever you are, and whatever your past—no matter what your struggles have been, and no matter what your worries are about the future—Jesus invites you to come to him today. He has covered the cost of your punishment for sin, once and for all. He who freely gives us abundant and eternal life is calling you to come to him today.

Will you accept his call?

Father God, may our hearts be filled with joy as we join in singing songs of praise to you. You alone are worthy of all our praise, through Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

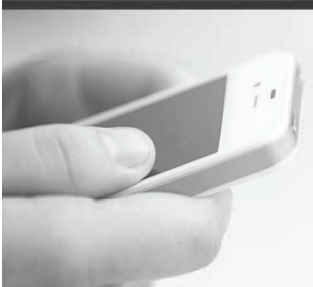
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