

May/June 2017

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew



LIFE  
*in*  
GOD'S GARDEN

ALSO: MALACHI: OUR HEAVENLY FATHER LOVES US

Friends:

I wish I was a gardener. I have a few house plants that I try to keep alive, but by now I'm down to only the hardiest of plants that can withstand sporadic watering. I love the idea of tilling soil, planting seeds, and gathering a harvest. It seems so earthy and nurturing, so productive, but I confess that, for me, gardening is both difficult and tedious—I haven't the patience to be a gardener. I need to find other ways to use my talents to cultivate culture. But I'm grateful for the way God patiently tends us all, cultivating and nurturing us toward fruitfulness!



In June, Don Byker will explore with us some of the rich biblical imagery of gardens, cultivation, and growing things, both as God's handiwork in creation and as a symbol of God's spiritual cultivation in our hearts. May the Spirit make us all more fruitful in every way!

But first, in May, Scott DeVries leads us through the last prophetic book of the Old Testament, Malachi. To a people returned from exile but still awaiting the Savior, God says, "I love you!"

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

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Steven Koster". The signature is written in dark ink on a light background.

—Steven Koster

# Today

May/June 2017

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**"Malachi: Our Heavenly  
Father Loves Us"**  
**Scott DeVries**



**"Life in God's Garden"**  
**Don Byker**

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TODAY (USPS 185-140),  
Volume 67, Number 3,  
published bimonthly by  
ReFrame Media, a division  
of Back to God Ministries  
International, at 6555 West  
College Drive, Palos Heights, IL  
60463. Periodicals postage paid  
at Palos Heights, Illinois, and at  
additional mailing offices.

Postmaster: Send address changes  
to Today, 6555 West College Dr.,  
Palos Heights, IL 60463.

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Cover photo by Markus Spiske,  
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**ReFrame**  
Media

# may

## **Malachi: Our Heavenly Father Loves Us**

**Scott DeVries**

The prophetic book of Malachi was written to God's covenant people, the Jews, the remnant of ancient Israelites who were able to return to Jerusalem and rebuild it after their exile in Babylon (see 2 Chronicles 36:15-23; Ezra 1–Nehemiah 12). Malachi is the last written book of the Old Testament, from about 400 years before Jesus' birth. The prophet Malachi sets the stage for Jesus to come.

Even after the exile, the relationship between God and his people is strained. They have been trying to get away with the minimum religious observance to appease God, but God sees their hearts. He sees that they don't really love him as they go through the motions of following his laws. So God sends a message to restore people's hearts to him. His message can be summarized simply: "I am your Father, and I love you."

Because God loves his children, he will discipline them, but he will also bless them when they turn back to him. God also gives strong hints that he will eventually come to his people. That prepares us for the New Testament message, in which we learn that God fulfills his promises by coming in Jesus Christ to offer salvation to anyone willing to be adopted into God's family.

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## GOD'S MESSAGE

*A prophecy: The word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi. "I have loved you," says the LORD.*  
—Malachi 1:1-2a

The name *Malachi* means "my messenger." God has a message for his people, and he wants to make sure they take it seriously from the start. This is a *prophecy*, God says; this is *my* word through *my messenger*. God even uses his covenant name, which in the Hebrew text is *YHWH* (*Yahweh*). In English we often render it as "the LORD" (with small capital letters). This is the name God used to describe himself when he made a covenant with his people through Moses (see Ex. 3:10-20). Then, in the message through Malachi, God adds again, "says the LORD," making clear that this is important.

So what is this important message that God makes such a big deal of? Very simply, it is "I have loved you."

God's love is the most important message of the entire Bible, and

God's love is the central message of Malachi. God loves us.

Throughout the rest of the book God's people ask him a lot of questions. And behind each one they are wondering, "How have you loved us?" God always has an answer, and he has never once let his love slip, not even for a moment.

God loves you, even if you aren't sure that he does. Even if you don't really know him yet. Even if you know him but have been resisting him or living in rebellion against him. He still loves you, and he very much wants you to know that.

Dear Lord, you love me. It sounds almost too good to be true. But you say it clearly. Thank you. I love you too and want to learn to love you better. Amen.

## LOVE IS A CHOICE

*"You ask, 'How have you loved us?'*

*"Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the LORD. "Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated. . . ."* —Malachi 1:2-3

God's love is not a copy of human love. Sadly, human love is often only a poor copy of God's love, and that causes some confusion when we see God acting or speaking in ways that we might think are not very loving. We like to assume that God's love should meet our approval instead of the other way around.

God's comment on Esau is confusing in this way. Jacob and Esau were brothers, but for unstated reasons God chose to accept Jacob and reject Esau. This goes back to the story of Jacob and Esau from Genesis 27. Their father, Isaac, being deceived by Rebekah and Jacob, pronounced a lavish blessing on Jacob but only a limited one on Esau.

This is actually a very important lesson about love. Many of us think of love as a feeling that

might lead to certain choices. But real love, God's kind of love, is actually a choice that leads to feelings.

These verses in Malachi are saying that God made a loving choice of Jacob (through no merit on Jacob's part) but not of Esau. Through Jacob, God worked out his plan of salvation that led to Jesus. We might never know the reason for that choice, but we do know that God's love is not led by feelings. We also know that God is not in the habit of rejecting anyone who sincerely wants to be chosen by him. "I have loved you," says our loving God.

Jesus, you died on the cross to open a pathway for all of us to come to you. Thank you for loving us that much. Amen.

## OUR FATHER IS PAYING ATTENTION TO US

*"You will see it with your own eyes and say, 'Great is the LORD—even beyond the borders of Israel.'"*  
—Malachi 1:5

The people of Edom, the descendants of Esau, may have thought they could undo what God had done. They didn't consider themselves God's children, so why would Israel's God pay attention to them?

Everyone has times when they'd like to think God isn't paying attention. Even people who believe in God sometimes act as if God doesn't see them. The people of Israel were feeling that way too. God pointed out that he *was* paying attention—even to people who didn't believe in him, like the nation of Edom in Israel's day. If God was paying attention to Edom, he was certainly also paying attention to Israel, and he pays attention to us today.

Many nations and people in the world today—in the west, east, north, and south—have a strained relationship with Christ

Jesus, the heavenly King of this world. Often we can see with our own eyes the problems caused by not following the one true God of love, joy, and peace. That reminds us that God is paying attention to nations as well as to individuals. He also pays attention to those close to him and to those far away from him. So we should pay attention to God too and serve him as best we can. Thanks be to Jesus that anyone who has wandered from God or who has never known him can find him simply by placing their trust in his Son, Jesus!

Dear God, we are sorry for treating you as if you're not paying attention. You watch over even people who don't know you. Please forgive us and help us to call on you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## GOD, OUR DISRESPECTED FATHER

*"If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?" says the LORD Almighty.*

—Malachi 1:6

The Israelites claimed that the one true God was their Father and Master. But many of the people weren't sincere about that, and their actions showed it. They had asked God if he loved them, but the truth was that they mostly offered lip service. If they truly loved God, they would show him due honor and respect.

God is such a loving Father that it's hard to imagine a human being ever showing him the honor he deserves. God is such a gracious and kind master that it's hard to imagine a human able to repay him the respect that is due him. And yet God does not give up his love for us. Romans 5:8 says, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Even though Israel was sinning against God, he sent Malachi to

try and convince them of his love and to urge them to return to him.

God didn't give up on Israel, and he doesn't give up on us either. No matter the disrespect and dishonor we have shown, God still loves us and strives to win us back. The false gods of the world require people to pursue them, but the true God of love pursues us.

Is God first in your life? Do you love him with everything you have and are? Do you tell and show him that you love him?

Dear Jesus, thank you for loving us so much that you even died for us. No one else wants us as much as you do. Help me to love you. Amen.



## TEACHERS OF CONTEMPT

*"It is you priests who show contempt for my name. But you ask, 'How have we shown contempt for your name?'"*

—Malachi 1:6

In Israel's day, the priests were supposed to lead the people to have a good relationship with God. But at the time of Malachi they were actually influencing the people to despise God's name. People respected God less because of the way the priests treated God.

God's name is God's reputation, and it's very important. It's how we think about him. Sometimes God's people portray him as angry and mean. Other times we portray him as being weak, or unfair, or uncaring. When God's people don't show the world what God is really like, it confuses people and makes them less likely to accept him.

Thankfully the Bible portrays God as he truly is—compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in love. Though God may become angry, his anger doesn't last, and his love returns. And in

his love the Lord removes our transgressions and sins from us—"as far as the east is from the west."

When we read the Bible and accept the whole book as the revelation of who God is, how God acts, and what his purposes are, then, over time, we can grow to know him better. He is the one, true, holy God who offers us salvation from sin. And as we grow to know him, we have a responsibility to honor God's name all over the world, showing people the loving God that he truly is.

Lord Jesus, you are gracious and kind. You haven't ignored our sin or the difficulties in this world. You gave your life to heal us. Help us to get to know you better each day. Amen.

## TO APPEASE OR TO PLEASE

*"But you ask, 'How have we defiled you?'"*

*"By saying that the LORD's table is contemptible." —Malachi 1:7*

Yesterday we noted that the priests were damaging God's reputation. Today's verses give a bit more detail. The priests of Israel were carrying out their religion half-heartedly. They were trying to appease God, not please God.

When we are truly in love with someone, we test ourselves to see how much we can do for them. A young man treats his girlfriend to a fancy restaurant even though he knows she would be satisfied with less. Love prompts us toward extravagance.

Fear pushes the opposite way. When we fear someone, we try to get away with giving less than they deserve. It's sinful, but we tend to hurt those who we fear might hurt us.

In the book of Malachi, God explains that he is the loving

Father of his people. He doesn't want them to be afraid of him. He wants love and respect. God wants the people to know that he's not out to hurt them. But they have been acting as if he were. Instead of testing themselves to give as much as they can, they try to give God less than he deserves.

God loves us and wants our love in return. He's not satisfied with our misunderstanding or thinking he's out to get us. Sacrifices offered out of fear show God that we don't understand him. Sacrifices offered out of love show that the God of love lives in us.

Dear Jesus, drive out our fear with your perfect love. In your name we pray. Amen.

## GIVING GOD OUR SCRAPS

*“Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?” says the LORD Almighty.*

—Malachi 1:8

God is our greatest authority. We wouldn't give our earthly authorities our scraps. Yet so often we offer God the leftover portions of our time, money, energy, thought, and emotion. He gets the scraps and rejects—just as the Israelites were offering the worst of their animals in sacrifice.

It must have been a burden to care for a blind or lame animal. The temptation to sacrifice such an animal would be very real. Wouldn't a blind or lame animal suit God's purposes just as well as any other animal?

We face a similar temptation. We pray with the five extra minutes we might have and aren't sure what else we can do with that time. We help with a service project on a Saturday that is “free” on our calendar. We're happy to tithe as long as we have some disposable

income. We read that deep religious book if we're in between novels.

We have to admit, though, that extras aren't really sacrifices. When we willingly sacrifice time, money, or energy that have value to us, it settles the greater value of God into our hearts and minds. God sacrificed his only Son for us. Certainly he is far more worthy of our best than any earthly authority.

Are you giving your best to him?

Dear Jesus, please forgive us for not treating you according to your full value. We want you to have our best. We want you to have our extras too. We want to be fully yours. Amen.

## GOD OF OUR HEARTS

*"Now plead with God to be gracious to us. With such offerings from your hands, will he accept you?" says the LORD Almighty.*

—Malachi 1:9

God is not petty. He does not expect that we will ever come close to repaying him for what he has done for us. Yet God is not to be mocked either. The tone of today's verses reminds us that God will not tolerate our poor treatment of him. If we are not willing to give him our best, we cannot expect him to accept our efforts.

Christianity can sometimes seem confusing. Our God is not concerned so much with what we do but why we do it. God looks deep into our hearts. He honors the smallest gift that was lovingly given. But he rejects the largest gifts that were given half-heartedly or out of a sense of obligation or fear.

This doesn't mean that people with even the best intentions never do unkind things or offer bad gifts. God needs to correct even our best intentions.

But the correction he gives to a right heart is gentle and much easier to receive.

In contrast, when our heart is in the wrong place, correction comes with greater difficulty. The misguided heart will eventually have to choose between God and whatever else competes with him. There will be heartache over whichever side loses. But it's far better that we eventually sacrifice the other attachments of our heart than that we reject God and later be rejected by him forever.

Dear Father, in your love you did not spare your greatest treasure for us—your Son, Jesus. Yet our hearts are often divided between you and other things. Help us to be devoted to you alone. Amen.

## SHUT THE DOORS, KEEP OUT THE PEOPLE

*"Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar!"* —Malachi 1:10

How horrible that God wanted his own temple doors closed! This is one of the strongest biblical warnings about worship. If our worship isn't really about loving and honoring God, it won't do any good to go through the motions.

The Israelites thought their worship *was* about God. They came to the temple to win God's favor and seek God's help—wasn't that all about God?

Many people of many religions, including many Christians, approach worship the same way. Often they are very concerned about the manner of worship. "We have to get this right," they think, "or God will be upset with us, won't answer our prayers, and might bring bad things upon us." Unfortunately they don't realize their thinking and their efforts are not *really* about God. If we worship that

way, it is really about us—what we can get for ourselves from God.

God, of course, sees through to our selfish motives. He knows that such worship is not worship at all; it's only an attempt to manipulate him. When God says that his "name is to be feared among the nations," he wants us to be awestruck by his love for us—so awestruck that we cannot help praising him. That's the kind of fear—that is, awe, wonder, and amazement at God's great love—that should engage our worship.

Dear Jesus, we are your temple. We are humbled that you would love us so much to save us and to honor us with the constant presence of your Spirit. We stand in awe of you! Amen.

**FOILED BY GOD**

*"If you do not listen, and if you do not resolve to honor my name," says the LORD Almighty, "I will send a curse on you."*

—Malachi 2:2

Throughout the book of Malachi, God is called "the LORD Almighty." "The LORD" (with small capital letters) stands for God's covenant name *Yahweh*, and it means, "I AM WHO I AM" (Gen. 3:14). So this name, "the LORD Almighty," reminds us that God is the all-powerful, loving God who actively cares for us. In the New Testament this is captured in the words "Jesus is Lord." The supreme Lord came to rescue us, because that's the kind of God he is (see Col. 1:15-20).

Our actions, too, stem from our character, and sometimes our actions show the truth of our hearts more clearly than our words do. Malachi reminds us that our actions should come from a heart set on God. When our actions come from anywhere else, they will be cursed by God. This means they won't

bring the results we were hoping for. God will intervene. Sometimes God intervenes through natural processes, bringing foolish actions to common-sense defeat or failure. And sometimes God intervenes supernaturally. God can instantly squash even the craftiest acts of rebellion.

Rather than rebel against our God and King, we ought to seek his will in prayer. He may guide us by way of Scripture or by a nudge of the Holy Spirit. He may move us to act humbly without clear direction. But he will always stand behind a heart that is set on honoring him.

Dear Jesus, help us to know your will. May your name be honored everywhere! Guide our efforts today, we pray. Amen.

## LET GOD RULE

*"My covenant was with [Levi], a covenant of life and peace."*

—Malachi 2:5

God's discipline is meant to restore his people to himself. God has "a covenant of life and peace" with his people, and he longs to restore that relationship. But life and peace do not come easily in this broken world. The covenant with Levi began when the Israelites worshiped a golden calf and ran wild with disobedience. Moses said, "'Whoever is for the LORD, come to me.' And all the Levites rallied to him" (Exodus 32:26). The Levites became a sort of police force to restore God's order from chaos. From then on, the reverence shown by the Levites was an indicator of God's restoring his relationship with his people.

The deeper my relationship with God becomes, the more I long to see Jesus take complete control of my life. Once that sounded oppressive to me; now it sounds like the greatest free-

dom. I am addicted to sin, and death is a continual threat to my life and peace. But through the Holy Spirit, Jesus weans me from those evil powers. I have found I cannot do it on my own; I need Jesus' help.

I have also found that Jesus' help often comes through other godly Christians—people who become like my own personal Levites. When we learn to live in humble community together, submitting to each other's guidance in Christ, we receive a life and peace that few others ever know. Have you found that to be true in your life?

Dear Jesus, be the Lord of my life. Root out any temptation to sin. Hold off the brokenness that leads to death. Put godly people in my life to keep me close to you. Amen.

## TEACHERS OF INTEGRITY

*"True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin."*  
—Malachi 2:6

These words about the tribe of Levi tell us what an influence we can have when we have integrity. Integrity is when everything about us is in alignment. Levi's actions were both righteous and peaceful, and they matched Levi's words. The Levites not only avoided being dishonest; they sought to help others understand the truth.

Because the Levites' words and actions were aligned, people were drawn away from sin. Integrity is powerfully attractive. A lack of integrity turns people away. In Malachi's day, the priests—that is, the Levites—needed this reminder. God was saying that if they wanted to see God's blessings again, they needed to live with integrity. Integrity would draw other people to be like them. And, more important, teaching the ways of God with integrity

would realign them with God's will and God's favor.

Christians today struggle with integrity just as God's people did in Malachi's time. Sometimes we say the right things, but the way we live or the attitude we carry is not aligned with our words. Other times our behavior is good, but our words might be cruel or vulgar.

Integrity would be impossible except for four little words in the example of Levi, "He walked with me." Walking with the Lord is our only hope for aligning our words and actions.

Dear Lord, write your ways and words on our hearts. Make us so in tune with your kingdom that we honor you in all we do and say. Amen.



## BREAK FREE OF FAVORITISM

*"I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law."*  
—Malachi 2:9

God does not play favorites. The priests in Malachi's time did. Back then, religious laws had a role in governing people, and a priest's viewpoint could influence public opinion about someone.

Favoritism has three victims: (1) People who are not favored are given a lower place in society than they deserve. (2) People who are favored shrink spiritually, becoming proud and selfish. They aren't missed when they're gone. (3) People who play favorites begin to be viewed with suspicion. They become despised and humiliated, as our verse states. After a time all three types begin to feel stuck where they are. The un-favored just can't get ahead. The favored become enslaved to their own desires, and sometimes burdened with a sense of owing those who favored them.

And those showing favoritism begin to see their self-worth in terms of what they can provide to other influential people.

Thankfully God's grace puts a surprising end to the notion of playing favorites. God does not play favorites; yet, through Jesus, God's favor is available to *anyone* who wants it. The favor of God is eternal life and peace. It shows up the favors of this world as silly and worthless.

If you want to receive God's favor in your life, please pray this prayer:

Dear Jesus, I renounce all the favors of this world. Please forgive me and save me from my sins. I want to live for you alone from now on. In your name I pray. Amen.

## OUR TRUE FAMILY

*Do we not all have one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our ancestors by being unfaithful to one another?*  
—Malachi 2:10

Unity is very important to God. Throughout the Bible God commands faithfulness and love. God makes and upholds covenants with his people, and he calls us to honor these covenants. God sees all human beings as one family, and he expects us also to see each other and treat each other that way.

In the area where I live, for two weeks many churches cover their signs with burlap saying "One Lord, One Church." This acknowledges that Christians have not been as united as they should be. Unfortunately, disunity is not a new sin in the church of Jesus Christ. Already in Malachi's time God's people were breaking faith with each other. Instead of acting like brothers and sisters, they often treated each other like enemies.

Jesus came to unite all people. In God's family "there is no Gentile

or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all" (Colossians 3:11). When Christ has filled someone's heart, that becomes their identity. Having Christ in our heart is deeper than ethnicity because we are all created by the same God and rescued from sin through Jesus Christ.

The church, God's family, is for everyone adopted by God through Jesus Christ. Christians, let us hold tightly to our brothers and sisters and remain united in God's love.

Dear Jesus, unite us together in your love. Add many brothers and sisters to us. Forgive us when we treat our spiritual family poorly. Amen.

## FAMILY FOUNDATIONS

*Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the LORD loves by marrying women who worship a foreign god.*  
—Malachi 2:11

God cares deeply about family. These verses begin a section of Malachi about how important family is to God.

A family needs a foundation of parents who agree on values and beliefs. In many ways everything we have read so far in Malachi has been leading to this discussion about family. If the community isn't upholding its faith foundation and the religious leaders aren't showing and teaching the importance of their faith, parents will be less likely to lay such a foundation in their family life.

That's what was happening in Malachi's day. With very little sincere trust and love for God in the community, young men were marrying women who didn't believe in the true God and worshiped other gods. What we believe and value has a way of coming out in our family life,

even if we think it's unimportant at the time. Imagine the tension in a home where either parent suspects the other of subverting his or her foundational beliefs. The sanctuary noted in our verse is referring not just to the temple but also the safe haven of the home.

A safe home includes parents who model themselves after the God of love and faithfulness. The God of the Bible loves his children unconditionally and self-sacrificially. He wants families in which both parents learn how to love from his example.

Father, help us to model our love and faithfulness after yours. May we honor you as the foundation of our families, finding direction and refuge in you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## LEARNING TO SACRIFICE

*You flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer looks with favor on your offerings. . . .*

—Malachi 2:13

Considering all the ways God's people have disrespected him, it might seem appropriate that they flood his altar with tears. But they feel sorry for themselves, not for their sin. They're weeping because they're not getting their way. They're not interested in genuine sacrifice.

Selfishness is powerful. It often stems from not getting something we think we deserve. Sometimes we might even be right about deserving it. Once while I struggled with bitterness, God probed me: *"Why not just let it go?"* But I thought, *"I have the right to be angry."* God did not challenge my right to be angry, but he did show me that I didn't need to exercise that right. Justice might *allow* us to be angry or sad, but selfishness often *requires* those emotions.

Selfishness easily becomes a habit. Injustices happen to us

every day; usually they are small bits of unfairness. As selfishness grows, it becomes increasingly difficult to let any of those things go.

Sacrifice has the opposite effect. As we grow in the ability to sacrifice, we grow to be at peace in a world of injustice. We can let others have even the things they have no right to. We realize that living a sacrificial life is more valuable than anything we might lose to someone else's selfish behavior.

Selfishness or selflessness: which do you show in your life?

Lord Jesus, you showed us the life of sacrifice. You paid for our injustice so that we can be free. Help us to follow your example. Amen.

## SACRIFICE FOR YOUR FAMILY

*The LORD is the witness between you and the wife of your youth.  
You have been unfaithful to her. . . .* —Malachi 2:14

Sacrifice is measured by difficulty. Jesus tells us in Luke 21:1-4 that the widow who gave two small coins sacrificed more than all the others did, because she gave all she had.

In Malachi's day not only were people skimping on their temple sacrifices (Malachi 1:7); they couldn't even sacrifice their desires in order to take care of their wives and children. It would have been one thing in God's eyes for men to skimp on what God deserved in order to take care of their families. But the men were also actually being unfaithful to their families.

It is an amazing display of the loving faithfulness of God that he tells the men of Israel that he won't accept their sacrifices if they don't take care of their families. Far too many of God's people have gotten it backwards, neglecting their marriage

and family for the sake of their career or even the church. One of my seminary professors once said that God will often ask our families to make sacrifices, but God will never ask us to sacrifice our families.

That statement lines up with this verse. When we are unfaithful to the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of our families, we are living outside of God's will. And there's never an excuse for that.

Dear Jesus, save us from our selfishness. Help us to love our families the way you love them and to sacrifice ourselves first for them. Please also let us have much left over to give for others. Amen.

## GOD LOVES CHILDREN

*Has not the one God made you? You belong to him in body and spirit. And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring.*

—Malachi 2:15

God loves children. Every child is made in the image of God.

In the garden of Eden, even before sin entered the world, God made people as body and spirit together, and he made male and female to reflect his image in the world. God commissioned people to care for his world, to cultivate culture, and to be fruitful and multiply. We were designed to reflect God's glory everywhere.

As a result, the children people produce are to be raised as citizens of God's kingdom, using their gifts to glorify God. That is the core calling of all parents.

Whether by nature or by nurture, a baby usually closely resembles his or her parents, both physically and spiritually. If the parents cannot overcome their differences by means of a self-sacrificing love modeled after

God's love, then the child will often be burdened with a spirit of division and disharmony. After all, that's what he or she will grow up with.

That's what God was seeing in Malachi's day. God's desire for us, always, is that we be godly offspring, children who love and serve him in a self-sacrificing way. In our world today, much of the opposite is taking place.

What kind of spirit will you give Jesus today, as well as to the children around you? Will it be a spirit that helps both you and them grow closer to Jesus?

Dear Jesus, please fill us with your love, and make it contagious in our families and beyond. Amen.

**GOD LOVES LOVE**

*Be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful.*

—Malachi 2:16

Some Bible versions translate the first part of this verse to say, “‘I hate divorce,’ says the LORD, the God of Israel.” God loves love. “God is love” (1 John 4:8)! It is in the very nature of God to hate it when love breaks down. God hates divorce.

But God does *not* hate divorced people! In fact, God hates divorce *because* he so loves the people that go through that turmoil. He hates watching them suffer. He hates watching their families and friends suffer. In some situations, God acknowledges the breakup of marriages. But God still hates the pain, frustration, and brokenness that fill the hearts of people he so dearly loves. Many people have found that divorce makes their pain even worse. If you're thinking of divorce, please seek help right away!

But this verse is not just about marriage vows. This verse is key

to the whole book of Malachi. God is saying here, “I don't want to divorce Israel!” Often in the Bible, God's people are described as the Lord's unfaithful bride. God would have every right to divorce a people as unfaithful and spiteful as Israel was. But God hates divorce. He loves love. Some marriages cannot be saved. But in the cross of Jesus we learn that God will do *all it takes*, even suffer death himself, not to divorce his wayward people—and that includes us today. Can we not try to turn our hearts to a God who loves us so?

Dear Jesus, you showed us the greatest love by dying to save us and to reconcile us with God. May we be filled with your self-giving love. Amen.

## GOD IS WEARY OF INGRATITUDE

*You have wearied the LORD with your words. "How have we wearied him?" you ask. By saying . . . "Where is the God of justice?"*  
—Malachi 2:17

I often have to quote these words to myself. It is easy to blame God when things seem unfair. A few years ago I had the privilege of visiting Haiti. I learned that my own hardships and complaints of injustice are often minor compared with those suffered by people in other lands. Many of our frustrations and inconveniences are merely "first-world problems." That helps me keep things in perspective.

Many of the people in Malachi's day were fairly well off. Life was not always fair, but others had it far worse. Yet they chose to focus on the few people who had it even better, and they complained that God was unfair. God eventually answered their complaints by saying they had most of it backwards. But for the moment it was sufficient

for God simply to say he was weary of their complaining.

God has given us life itself. He sent his Son to die for our sins. The very food we eat and the clothes we wear are provided by God. I've met so many people from poorer countries than mine who seem to understand that fact a lot better than we do. They are less likely to complain about what they don't have and much more ready to thank God for what they do have.

I'm thankful for their example!

Dear Father, thank you for all your provisions. Please give us our daily bread, and forgive us when we complain that we haven't received more. In Jesus' name, Amen.



## GETTING PREPARED FOR GOD

*"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me."*

—Malachi 3:1

This verse is often connected with John the Baptist, the prophet who came to prepare the way for Jesus. It is even quoted in Mark 1:2. But before it was about John the Baptist, it was about Malachi himself, whose name means "my messenger." The message God sent through Malachi was the answer to Israel's questions about where God was and when he was coming.

The purpose of Malachi (and John the Baptist) was to prepare the way ahead of the Lord's coming. We've been looking mostly at the main message that God loves his people. But we've discovered along the way that the people were failing in their love for God. Before God came to them, he wanted them to know where they stood with him. They had time to make improvements in their relation-

ship with God, but that time would someday end.

The same is true for us who await Christ's second coming. What's truly important about being ready for Christ's return is our relationship with him. Are we eager for him to come? I've noticed that the closer I grow to Christ, the more disconnected I become with earthly things. Are there things you are attached to that you have a hard time letting go? Don't assume there will always be time later to straighten your priorities. Now is the time to have our hearts prepared.

Dear Jesus, help us to know you more deeply. May we die to ourselves daily—our stuff, our relationships, even our identity. Give us a growing dependence on you. Amen.

## NEED TO GET CLEAN?

*Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap.*  
—Malachi 3:2

Scrubbing is a good thing—unless you're a dirty toddler. Refining is also a good thing—unless you're the metal. In both cases the outcome is good, but the process of getting there can be uncomfortable and even painful. Malachi recognizes that his message needs to get people ready for spiritual refinement. While the people give lip service to believing in God, their actions don't show that they really love him.

John the Baptist faced a similar challenge just before Jesus came. His message was welcomed by people who knew they were dirty and desperately wanted to be cleansed. For them the process was worth the result. But for those who didn't feel dirty it was difficult to submit to John's uncomfortable message. The baptism that John offered symbolized a spiritual cleansing, and not everyone thought they needed it.

John the Baptist promised that Jesus would come with a baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire. This combines the imagery of Malachi's message with the work of the Holy Spirit. A life committed to Jesus Christ is a life submitted to the cleansing and refining work of the Spirit of God. Again, the process is frightening; it requires loss. But what is found is worth much more than what is lost—new life, freedom, courage, joy, peace, love, and much more.

Are you willing to submit to God's gracious cleansing?

Dear Jesus, cleanse us with your Spirit. Refine us. Take away our sin and shame and fill us with beauty and integrity. Help us submit to you. Amen.

**ADMITTEDLY GUILTY, GRACIOUSLY ACCEPTED**

*Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD.*  
—Malachi 3:3-4

Throughout Malachi's message, the people's lack of commitment has been a telltale sign of the distance between them and God. These verses predict that when the refiner comes, the people's hearts will return to God and their sacrifices will again please him.

It is one of the great paradoxes of Christianity that we turn to God at the same moment that we realize how much we've offended him. This is a sign of the Holy Spirit's work. Rather than responding to God's chastisement with pride, defensiveness, or rebellion, we instead respond with humility, remorse, and repentance. We humbly ask for God's forgiveness and gratefully look forward to the beginning of a relationship with Christ.

In all this we again see the Lord's amazing love for us. We stand before him admittedly

guilty, without any defense or excuse, and deserving of whatever punishment God should choose. And God chooses not to punish us at all! We have learned our lesson—that we need to be close to him who loves us most. And that's all he wants of us. No retribution, no paying back what we lost, stole, or broke, no making amends for all the grief we have caused. He simply forgives us. We find at that point that our "sacrifices" are transformed into offerings of gratitude from the heart.

Dear Jesus, I have sinned in thought, word, and deed. Please forgive and cleanse me, Lord and Savior. Help me live a life of gratitude and service to you. In your name, Amen.

## ON THE WRONG SIDE OF JUSTICE

*"I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify. . . ."*

—Malachi 3:5

In Malachi 2:17 the people asked, "Where is the God of justice?" In today's verse God answers that question: the Lord is coming, but many who are asking will be on the wrong side of justice when he arrives. For them, God's justice will be an unwelcome surprise.

I did not grow up as wealthy, popular, or influential as some others in my culture. That didn't always seem fair to me. But as an adult I've learned that the small bits of unfairness in my life are not nearly as devastating as the injustices occurring daily against others.

Things are rough everywhere. I've met wealthy people with severe depression; influential people with cancer; joyful people who have to find their food in other people's trash cans; hopeful people who have lost everything to a natural disaster; peaceful people who have

left everything to escape war or persecution; loving people suffering from broken hearts. Some issues seem much worse than others. But this section in Malachi warns us not to assume that we have it so bad.

We are all victims of injustice at some level, but we also perpetrate injustice toward others—sometimes directly but often by participating in social systems that undervalue certain people or groups. Malachi reminds us to consider the advantages and blessings we've received before complaining about the injustices done to us.

Father, each of us has received the breath of life from you—and so much more. Forgive us for any way in which we've contributed to injustice against others. Amen.

## RETURNING TO GOD

*"I the LORD do not change. So you . . . are not destroyed. . . . Return to me, and I will return to you."* —Malachi 3:6-7

From early times the Israelites had a tendency to turn away from God. But God always let them turn back. In one of Jesus' parables, a man's son shames his father and runs away. Eventually the son comes to his senses and returns, hoping for a small scrap of mercy. But the father is gracious and showers the son with love (see Luke 15:11-32). That is how Jesus describes our Father's relationship with his children.

We have limits to our patience and mercy. Occasionally I must appeal to my kids, "I don't have any patience left." If they keep going, I'm afraid my reaction won't be fair. But the patience and mercy of God, who rules the universe, never run out. If we commit the same sin a billion times and are truly sorry for it, he will keep forgiving.

This is not to say there are no consequences. God wants us

to look to him. We should not expect to be forgiven without wanting a relationship with God. His forgiveness is about building a relationship with us that will keep us close to him and far from hurting ourselves and others. The heart of God does not change on that point, and if we truly want a relationship with him, the Lord will always take us back.

On this day when the church commemorates Jesus' ascension to heaven, what is your relationship with the ascended King? Do you love and serve him as your Lord and Savior?

Dear Jesus, teach us to love. May we reject anything that comes between us and you. Forgive us and take us back when we stray. Amen.

## COME AND SHARE GOD'S TABLE

*"But you ask, 'How are we to return?' Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, 'How are we robbing you?' In tithes and offerings."*  
—Malachi 3:7-8

The Israelites are not sure how to come back to God. God lays out a fairly simple path: if they stop robbing him, he will help them return.

In the Old Testament, giving God tithes and offerings wasn't simply about money. Gifts brought as a tithe were used to provide offerings of food at the temple. People were to eat part of an offering themselves and to share it with the Levites and the poor (Deuteronomy 14:22-29). Tithes and offerings were about sharing a meal with God and others—a way to build relationships and to share God's material blessings.

By telling the people to stop robbing him of tithes and offerings, God is asking them to come and share his table again. Sitting down for a meal together won't automatically set everything right, but it's a

good start. It's a simple gesture indicating that God is still their Father and they are his children. It begins to restore the relationship between the people and the priests and Levites. People provide the food, and the priests and Levites teach and represent the presence of God. Sharing with the poor also begins to restore justice between those who have enough and those who don't.

What might you offer today to build, restore, or continue a relationship with God and others?

Heavenly Father, show me today how to build up my relationship with you. I want to learn to give you my whole heart. Amen.

## THE FLOODGATES OF HEAVEN

*"Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this . . . and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven. . . ."*  
—Malachi 3:10

This is one of the more well-known verses in the book of Malachi. It seems to offer a simple formula to receive God's blessings. Give to God, and he will give back even more. But people who care only about material blessings are going to be disappointed.

What God is really saying is that if his children are in a good relationship with him, he will bless them abundantly. In my personal experience that has not meant riches or perfect health. But I've found that when my relationship with God is close, two things happen.

First, I'm quicker to notice the types of blessings God promises. I notice that my efforts are more productive with fewer things going wrong. This is a real material blessing. Second, my expectations in life become more reasonable, resulting in

more contentment with less stuff. Often that contentment comes through the humble realization that in most of the world people would call me blessed with riches. This is a spiritual blessing.

Both the material and the spiritual blessings come through first drawing closer to God. God is not interested in religious formulas that appear to coerce him into blessing us. Instead, God wants a relationship in which he can be our loving, generous Father. Do you have that kind of relationship with God?

Father, thank you for putting our relationship first. Help us to give with the right motives and appreciate you over all the blessings you provide. Amen.

## WHAT DOES GOD GIVE?

*"You have spoken arrogantly against me," says the LORD. "You have said, 'It is futile to serve God.'"*  
—Malachi 3:13-14

Sometimes it can seem futile to serve God. These verses point out that sometimes arrogant people are blessed, evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge and test God seem to get away with it. It can seem that it's better to be bad than to be good.

Many people today make this same mistake and ask the same questions. It's not that they are mistaken in what they see; oftentimes arrogant, wicked, and brazen people do acquire more wealth and power than others. But the mistake the people are making is in what they consider a blessing.

In the Lord's Prayer, God's people pray for God's glory, his kingdom, their daily bread, forgiveness, and delivery from evil. The measure of success is not wealth, fame, and power. If we complain about the blessings

that evil people receive, we are actually exposing the immaturity of our own faith. We show that we are still struggling with the desire to place our trust in material blessings rather than in Jesus Christ. That begs the question of how we might bend or break the rules if we have the opportunity to gain wealth or power. Maybe our hearts are not yet so different from those wicked people whose prosperity we covet.

What does it look like to covet God's kingdom and his will? Where do you place your trust?

Dear Jesus, forgive our envy and jealousy. Wean our hearts from the desire for wealth and power. Replace that with the desire for your kingdom and glory. Help us to grow in our trust of your provision every day. Amen.



## TURNED INTO TREASURE

*Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. . . . "On the day when I act," says the LORD Almighty, "they will be my treasured possession."*

—Malachi 3:16-17

Throughout the book of Malachi we have been reading about one insult against God after another. For some people this disrespect was deep in their hearts. But for others the disrespect came out of a distance from God that they didn't really want. This latter group finally became convicted of their sins and turned back to God. And in an amazing display of grace, God accepted them back.

Then God went a step further. He not only accepted those who turned back to him; he showed them the mercy a good father shows to his children.

God's treatment of the forgiven as treasured children is shown completely when, with his own Son, Jesus, on the cross, the Father accepts the perfect sacrifice of his one Son to cover the sins of all his adopted children.

Truly our Father in heaven loves and values us far more than we can ask or imagine!

If you are feeling far from God, or if you know or suspect that you have been disrespectful to him, ask for his forgiveness. Ask him to bring you close, that you may know his grace and mercy in powerful ways.

If you have never known his love, ask God to overcome your heart with his mercy and grace today.

Dear Father, you proved your love for us through the gift of your Son and secured us in grace forever. By your Spirit, move us to love you and live faithfully always. Amen.

## RAYS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

*"For you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays."*  
—Malachi 4:2

This beautiful promise near the end of the book of Malachi was for those who felt convicted of their disrespect for God and who signed the "scroll of remembrance" to recommit themselves to God. Righteousness would rise up to shine on them like the rays of the sun. And in those rays they would find healing.

We might reasonably ask what sort of healing Malachi had in mind. Malachi talks again about the last days when the world will be purified as with fire. He had pointed out that no one was safe from God's refining fire (Malachi 3:2-3). In other words, we are all sinners. The difference is that those who live in humble repentance for the sin that makes them distant from God will be forgiven of their sins. Those who will not fear God will be consumed as

in a fire that burns everything completely.

Just as those who signed the scroll of remembrance in Malachi's day, we too have the opportunity to commit or recommit ourselves to God. If we can accept and repent of our own sin and imperfection, the hurts we have caused others, and the distance our sin has created between ourselves and God, then God's righteousness will rise like the sun on us as well.

Dear Jesus, you rose from the dead and shined your righteousness on me. I know that you have paid for my sins. Please accept my prayer and help me to commit my life to you. Amen.

## REUNION WITH GOD

*"I will send the prophet Elijah to you. . . . He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents. . . ."*  
—Malachi 4:5-6

The closing verses of Malachi remind us what the whole book has been about. They also point ahead to the New Testament.

Malachi began by stating God's love for his children. Israel had become distant from God. But God sent Malachi (whose name means "my messenger") to show Israel how they had wandered from God. Now God promises that Elijah (whose name means "my God is *Yahweh*") will restore the relationship. The names of these prophets are important—the message from God (Malachi) results in the LORD again being the God of his people (Elijah).

These words point powerfully to the New Testament and the good news of Jesus of Nazareth, who is God's Messiah. John the Baptist proclaimed Christ's coming, fulfilling Malachi's prophecy about Elijah (see Matthew

11:7-15). Through John, the people turn to God in repentance, and then Jesus' baptism recalls Malachi 4:6: "You are my Son, whom I love" (Mark 1:11). John recognizes Jesus as the Word—the very message of God—fulfilling the purpose of Malachi.

In this last Old Testament prophetic book, God says, "I love you." And in the New Testament God shows how much he loves us: he sent his only Son, and he sent his Holy Spirit to bring us to himself. This is how much God loves you!

Dear Lord, you turn our hearts back to you. Thank you for making us your treasured children. Help us to love and serve you always. In Jesus, Amen.

# june

## Life in God's Garden

**Don Byker**

I have been drawn to gardening since I was a boy. Wherever I have lived as an adult—in cities, small towns, high desert, or rural countryside—I have succumbed to the itch to begin and tend gardens. And almost inevitably I find myself in the company of others for whom gardening is a deep desire planted in their hearts. Over the years, family and friends have tapped into this instinct and taught me a lot about the gardening life.

The Bible depicts God as a gardener. It draws illustrations from cultivation and all manner of growing things to teach and form us for life in our Father's world. I have come to see this earth and world as God's garden in which he has planted us to grow and bear fruit. In this life, the divine gardener is cultivating followers of Jesus to live and serve on this earth. All of this anticipates and prepares us for life and service and gardening in God's new heaven and earth. So I invite you to join me in considering life in God's garden.

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## CONSIDER HOW WE GROW

*"Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these."*  
—Luke 12:27

My interest and ability in gardening is only mildly remarkable—especially considering I grew up in a family that did not garden. I do remember showing a keen interest in my grandparents' garden. And one of my first jobs as a bumbling teen was to help my Aunt Helen in her gargantuan garden.

My interest in gardening grew gradually with experience over the years. But I think my interest goes deeper because Jesus, our Creator and Savior, is a most insightful observer of how his creation grows. He uses examples from nature to make important points in his teaching.

As Jesus sits on a mountain-side teaching his fickle followers and the distractible crowd, his sharp eyes light on the splendor of nearby wild flowers. Considering them, Jesus makes a stunning comparison

that produces a simple and profound life lesson. In God's garden, fretting and wearisome work are not only unnecessary but are actually a counter-productive insult flung in the face of our caring Creator. If God renders such beauty from nature, will he not care for you?

This month, we'll follow Jesus' counsel to "consider" how we grow and are being formed in God's garden. Although you may not feel at home in an actual garden, the beauty and glory of life have deep roots in our souls, which need to find their home in the Lord.

King of Creation, as I walk with you to consider God's garden, open my eyes to your abundant blessings of life. Amen.

## PLANTED IN GOD'S GARDEN

*The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.*  
—Genesis 2:15

I notice the subject of gardening sprouting up everywhere. The cultivation and care for living, growing things is grounded deeply in the soul of who we are as created beings in God's garden.

In the beginning God planted us human beings in his perfect garden. Previous verses from the creation story make clear that God is the original gardener. He created the vegetation—seed-bearing plants, trees that have fruit with seeds, shrubs, and all kinds of trees. From the beginning, God intended this first garden to produce food for all kinds of creatures and humankind year after year.

Genesis 2:15 shows that God planted people in that first garden “to work it and take care of it.” This suits us because we are from God—created in his image to be like him—and we

are also from the ground. We might even say that gardening—working and caring for growing things—is in our bones. Cultivating the gifts of God for the glory of God is what we are meant for.

Gardening involves cultivating, planting, watering, pruning, protecting, harvesting, and much more. When we are drawn to the world of soil, plants, and trees, it is no coincidence. We're designed to care for the earth, other creatures, and each other. Cultivation is rooted in our beginning and continual thriving in God's garden.

Lord, thank you for this vision of the garden you planted in paradise for us to work and care for with you. Recreate us in Christ back to your purpose for our lives. Amen.

## WALKING IN THE GARDEN

*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.* —Genesis 3:8

One of my great joys is walking in my garden “in the cool of the day.” This is especially delightful in early summer, when plants are healthy and blooming with the promise of maturing fruit. However, as summer fades, plants begin to die as produce withers and rots on the vine. The delight of a walk in the garden turns into a mild case of despair.

The change in the garden of paradise was much more sudden for the Lord. The delight of his walks dissipated like a morning mist as he found his garden caretakers afraid and hiding from him. The most beautiful “plant” in his garden was showing the first and fatal signs of decay and death. The forecast for a healthy harvest became mixed and dreary. I cannot imagine that God did not experience a deep sadness over his deteriorating garden.

I know that the process of change and decay my garden goes through every year is normal. Still, I am always a little surprised and feel a sense of sadness when my garden takes that turn toward dying and death. My walk in the garden is spoiled, and I am disheartened.

I know that God could not have been surprised when Adam and Eve sinned. Thankfully, he still took his walk in the garden that day to find them—and he does the same for us.

Lord God, we see change and decay all around us. Thank you for still coming and walking in your garden—to find us. Tune our ears to hear and respond to your call to us in Christ. Amen.

## GOD'S CURSED GARDEN

*"Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you. . . ."*  
—Genesis 3:17

I planted my very own garden at the first home that my wife and I owned. It was exciting to see the first seeds break through the ground and the plants grow bigger every day. The work was fulfilling, especially as I anticipated the fruits of my labor.

But as the garden grew, unwelcome weeds grew as well. Often they grew faster and thicker than the plants I had cultivated. More troublesome, they competed for the ground, sun, nutrients, and water that my plants needed. I now had the wearisome work of weeding if I wanted my produce to grow.

My weeds reflect what happened to God's perfect garden long ago. Today's verses tell us that struggling with weeds and wickedness is part of living in a cursed creation—cursed because of humanity's disobedi-

ence. The pattern has sickeningly persisted in all gardens ever since.

It's important to note that the curse is not in the work of gardening but in the frustration of toiling against weeds and wickedness. And the work is not without blessing. Fruit and food still come from our toil. God's creation is still good. Yet our frustration alerts us to our need to be rescued and released, along with creation, from the curse of sin and death. We need a Savior!

Lord God, thank you for this world and the work you still bless so that we can have daily food. Channel our frustration with work to heighten our dependence on our Savior and Lord, Jesus. Amen.



## DESOLATION AND REST

*"As the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth . . . so is my word that goes out from my mouth."*  
—Isaiah 55:10-11

While living in California's central valley, I learned some surprising things about almond orchards. For example, I learned that almond trees need about 500 hours of sub-40 degree temperatures in winter for a good crop yield in the summer. The orchards in winter looked desolate to me, but almond farmers called it a time of rest. I now live in central Michigan, where a variety of fruit trees grow. The orchards here also need a winter rest in order to be fruitful each year.

Snow and cold were not things I viewed as necessary for growing fruit. Naively, I thought of winter as a waste of time—a time of waiting for the return of spring so that gardens and orchards could flourish again. Now I see things differently. Isaiah points us in this different

direction too, in the picture he paints.

We need watering too, as God's plantings. Warm rain and cold snow are both part of God's watering program for a rich harvest. The watering of his Word is sometimes warm and comforting. In other seasons his Word may be more like snow that chills and challenges us to rest in his higher thoughts and purposes.

Reconsider a thought from God's Word that has you wrestling with God. Rest with that thought and let it sink deep in your heart and mind.

Thank you, Lord, for your Word and how it waters my life to fulfill your purpose. Open my heart to let your Word sink in and transform me. Amen.

## PLOWING AND REST

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

—Exodus 34:21

On a glorious early spring Saturday afternoon, I went out to plow up my garden. It was growing dark quickly as I finished my first pass. I knew that I needed to plow deeper. It occurred to me that Sunday afternoon might be my next best opportunity to plow again. But something stopped me in my tracks. Perhaps it was my up-bringing. Digging deeper, I wonder if my Creator and Master Gardener drew me up short.

Today's verse about resting from plowing may seem to be buried in instructions about feasts, sacrifices, and driving out pagan nations. This command to rest, "even during the plowing season and harvest," might seem counter to the obvious. As any good gardener or farmer knows, these are the busiest and most crucial times. Still, for this and other good reasons,

rest is necessary. We also need to remember where real rest comes from.

We can easily forget that toil and material success are not the goals of life. Knowing and enjoying God is our purpose. Taking time to worship recreates for us a place of rest and refuge in a bewildering wilderness of busyness and misguided priorities. Gardens wither; empires crumble. Without rest from work and time with God, we lose sight of our Creator, Rescuer, and Deliverer, who leads us to the land of promise.

Lord, thank you for your wisdom and grace. May we be grateful for rest in all the seasons of life, especially the busy times. Refresh us as we rest in our Savior, Jesus. Amen.

## THE MYSTERY OF SEEDS

*"Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how."*  
—Mark 4:27

My wife and I plant a variety of seeds—beans and radishes in rows, zucchini and squash in mounds. These methods make the sprouting and growing of seeds no less of a mystery. Surely there is a scientific explanation today for the sprouting of seeds and the growth of tender shoots, and that will only increase my awe.

When our children were young, we enjoyed reading the stories of *Frog and Toad Together* by Arnold Lobel. One favorite was the tale of Toad planting a garden. After a day or two he began to fret about whether his seeds would ever sprout and grow. So he sang to them, stayed up with them all night (in case they were afraid of the dark), and even screamed at them and wept over them. Exhausted, Toad finally fell asleep. When he awoke, he saw

to his great relief that the seeds had sprouted.

Too often, I am like Toad when working in Jesus' church and God's kingdom. I act and feel as if it all depends on me. As Jesus tells us in his parable, however, God's garden grows from seed to harvest "all by itself." So much of this is a mystery. We need to do our part—sow the seed, water, tend the garden, and reap the harvest—but we do not make the seed grow. That happens by God's gracious work. We can simply delight in doing our small part in growing the kingdom.

Dear God, thanks for the gift and mystery of seeds. Help me to humbly do my part in work and prayer and to rely on you for growth in and around me. In Jesus I pray. Amen.

## SUN, RAIN, AND LOVE FOR EVERYONE

*"He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."* —Matthew 5:45

We welcomed the rain after the first sunny, hot days of late spring. The tender young plants in our garden had begun to wilt. Sprinkling had helped, but as any gardener knows, there's nothing like rain from the heavens. So we were grateful for the soaking rain from our heavenly Father.

Everyone around us received rain—even people who speak of "Mother Nature" or express no gratitude to the Father for raining his blessings on them. I sometimes wonder about this. Maybe you do too. My wife and I did our best to teach our children to say thank you for the gifts they received. (When they did not give thanks, I was tempted to withhold gifts the next time around.)

Our verse for today has been quoted across the centuries in theological debates. This les-

son from God's garden demonstrates the heavenly Father's providence to all his undeserving children—"the evil and the good." And the lesson goes further. God's grateful children are to show heavenly love to "enemies" such as betrayers, cheats, and persecutors.

For this work of love, I recommend beginning the day with prayer for how you can shine God's warmth and goodness into the lives of friends and enemies alike. And throughout the day, pray that all your neighbors will come to know the Father through Jesus, the Son.

Father in heaven, thank you for sunshine and rain. As I receive your gifts, remind me that they are for sharing and reflecting your perfect love with others. In Jesus, Amen.

## COWORKERS IN GOD'S GARDEN

*We are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field. . . .*

—1 Corinthians 3:9

Sometimes I think of our backyard garden as my project. After all, I plow in spring; I plant seeds and seedlings (with some help from my wife); I stake up tomato plants (with help cutting and tying the strings); I cultivate around plants; I pick the produce (with help when the harvest is heavy); I uproot plants as they die off; and I plow up the garden before winter. Come to think of it, my wife processes the produce, and occasionally I assist. As you can see, the garden is more than my project. I need a coworker in the garden.

God's garden is as big as this world. Comparing and competitive Christians in Corinth needed to be reminded that God never planned for us to tend his garden alone. Nor was one person more important than another in this project. We are all privileged to be coworkers

with God and each other in our Lord's mission to rescue and restore his creatures and creation. And each person is important.

Working together is essential in the field we call the church. Our gifts and efforts are encouraged and coordinated, and relationships are cultivated to build up the body of Christ as God's agents of transformation in the world. The most effective churches I have served know and practice this.

How are you doing with your church in working together in God's garden?

Lord, only you can make your church grow in line with your purposes. Help me to work well with you and with all others in Christ. Amen.

## MILK AND HONEY (AND BEES)

*"I have come down to rescue them . . . and to bring them . . . into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey."*

—Exodus 3:8

One of my sons and I keep bees. We have learned a great deal about these fascinating creatures in God's garden. Bees are an intricate part of the ecosystem, especially for the pollination of fruit trees and vegetables. We have developed a deep respect and love for bees. So I was bothered to see that bees are mentioned in the Bible—in passing or negatively—only a few times.

But our verse for today does mention "milk and honey" to describe the bountiful promised land to which God would bring his people. That phrase crops up again and again in the history of God's people. A land flowing with honey signals a great harvest of fruit and vegetables made possible by bees pollinating plants and trees. And the honey they produce is really

their food, but they "share" it with us and other creatures.

I don't think it bothers bees that they don't get more credit for how they benefit the ecology of God's garden as they produce their sweet honey. They are "fearfully and wonderfully made" creatures that simply go about the work God has given them in his world. The bees teach me also to simply go about my work and "not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9).

Lord, thank you for bees and for their work that blesses us with fruits and honey. Teach us to be like bees in your kingdom, sharing the bounty of your creation. Amen.

## VOLUNTEERS IN GOD'S GARDEN

*"We tried to stop him, because he is not one of us."*

*"Do not stop him," Jesus said, "for whoever is not against you is for you."*  
—Luke 9:49-50

In our garden in the springtime, plants come up that we did not plant. We call them "volunteers." Along with the beans or cabbage we have planted, we often will find a tomato plant or a squash vine in a strange place. The temptation is to weed out the "volunteers" and make the garden more orderly. This past year, I resisted the temptation, reasoning that we would have a greater harvest by letting the "volunteers" grow.

The mostly clueless and competing disciples of Jesus reported that they saw a "volunteer" driving out demons in Jesus' name. They had followed their impulse and tried to remove him from their company. But Jesus' perspective is more expansive. He tells his faltering followers to let the "volunteer" keep working.

Perhaps you have faced a similar dilemma when observing Christ followers who may think, talk, and act differently from the way you do. The style of their service may not suit your tastes. But if they bear fruit in Jesus' name, you need to heed Jesus' words of correction: "Whoever is not against you is for you."

A good next step might be to explore ways to work together with this "volunteer" in the kingdom garden.

Jesus, may your Holy Spirit move us to embrace and serve with followers who may minister in ways that are different from us. Transform our minds and warm our hearts toward all who serve in your name. Amen.

## WEEDS IN THE GARDEN

*"While you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest."*

—Matthew 13:29-30

Weeding is one of my least favorite activities. But I know that weeds can overtake and ruin a garden, and I want to protect my garden and help it thrive. So, early in the season, I cultivate around young plants and pick and pull weeds. And even though I try to be careful, I sometimes pull up plants along with the weeds. At these times, I keenly sense the wisdom of the gardener in Jesus' parable.

There are some critical differences, though, between weeds in my garden and the weeds in Jesus' parable. Those weeds were deliberately and liberally sown by the farmer's enemy. And those weeds would have looked much like young wheat plants at first. In addition, the roots of the wheat and weed plants were already intertwined before the act of sabotage was detected. So weeding would

have destroyed the good with the bad. Not weeding made good sense in that scenario.

Most significantly, the parable reveals God's wisdom and mercy for us today too. Our enemy, the devil, has been and is actively sowing weeds among the good seeds in God's garden. We may wonder why God does not weed out wicked people and evil from his world, but we can be thankful that he is most intent on preserving his people until the harvest.

Father, we praise you for your wisdom, mercy, and patience. Protect us from evil and preserve us, together with all your people, until the day of harvest. In Christ, Amen.



## GARDENING IN THE CITY

*"Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. . . . Increase in number there; do not decrease."*

—Jeremiah 29:5-6

One of the best years of our life as a young family was when we lived on the south side of Chicago. We were Dutch-Americans living in a mostly African-American neighborhood. As soon as possible after moving in, I dug up part of the backyard and planted a garden. My first thought was for the produce we would enjoy—and the money we would save.

If you have ever lived far away from extended family, friends, and the place you have called home, you know a little of what it feels like to live in exile. And at some point you must decide to embrace your new surroundings and put down roots.

The Jewish people to whom Jeremiah wrote the words in this letter were in forced exile. They were carried off to the big imperial city of Babylon. The familiar surroundings of

Jerusalem became a mournful memory. Jeremiah's words to them, at first, probably sounded startling and offensive.

Big, unfamiliar cities are often portrayed as harsh and evil—the opposite of places we call home. Curiously, though, in such places God tells his people to "build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce." Our Chicago garden also led to over-the-fence conversations and sharing produce with our neighbors. And blessings were multiplied to all.

Lord Almighty, open us up to being planted in places where we can be agents of your influence. Lead us into relationships that will transform us and others. In Jesus, Amen.

## SEEKING THE PEACE OF THE CITY

*"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

During the year my family and I lived in Chicago, we planted a garden. By God's grace, this led to an over-the-fence relationship with a neighbor.

God's prophet Jeremiah relayed the message that God's people would be in the foreign city of Babylon for many years. The deeper reason behind the command to "plant gardens" could well have been that it takes time to get a good garden going. God wanted his people to put down roots in this city where they would be living for seventy years. God had plans and purposes beyond anything they could have dreaded or imagined.

For whatever length of time God plants us in unfamiliar and perhaps uncomfortable surroundings, his vision is for much more than our day-to-day existence and passing time.

When you put down roots and "seek the peace and prosperity" of any place where God sends you, you will also more likely obey his command to pray for that community.

The promised harvest that comes with a cultivated obedience to this command is that "you too will prosper." I caught only a glimpse of that during our year in Chicago. But since that time my prayers and vision have been growing. Do you pray for your neighborhood?

Lord of heaven and earth,  
you have determined the  
places where we will live.  
Move us to pray and work  
for the peace and prosperity  
of the communities  
where you have placed us.  
In Jesus' name, Amen.

## ENJOYING THE HARVEST

*The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops.*

—2 Timothy 2:6

A delicious joy comes with eating that first tomato or zucchini you have grown in your garden. People who grew up on farms or with gardens know this joy intimately. And it is intensified when you have been involved in the beautiful and strenuous process of helping plants grow.

In our verse for today, the farmer is rightly described as “hardworking.” As much as I enjoy gardening, I know it is hard work. I’ve learned that without a constant focus on planting and protecting the garden and doing the weeding and watering along the way, there will be a limited harvest at best. Joy comes from being intimately involved from start to finish, seeing the growth and being the “first to receive” and enjoy the bounty that comes from this hard work.

Paul, the writer of this letter, offers this comparison to Timothy

(and all faithful witnesses) to make a larger point. Ministry is hard work. I’ve learned this from the aches, pains, and disappointments of serving as a Christ-follower and pastor. Like farming and gardening, it requires a singular focus and a disciplined love for the plants in the garden. Thankfully, God has given me joy in seeing people grow in “the grace that is in Christ Jesus.”

Work hard in serving others. You will find joy in sharing in the refreshing harvest of transformed lives.

Christ Jesus, thank you for the strength of your grace to do the good and hard work of serving others. Refresh my spirit with the joy of sharing in the harvest of transformed lives. Amen.

## GARDENING AND VACATIONING

*The LORD will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.*  
—Psalm 121:7-8

Being a gardener means my garden is always on my mind—especially in the growing season. This can involve both agony and ecstasy. With the garden gloriously blooming and with produce starting to hang heavy on vines and branches, tending the garden is on my mind daily. This made thinking about going on a planned vacation with my wife this past summer both a delight and somewhat worrisome. Who would watch over the garden? Who would pick the produce? Going away for a few days seemed almost like sleeping on the job.

This reflection prompts me to be all the more amazed with the Lord, the divine gardener. The creator of heaven and earth watches over us always. The Lord does not fall asleep on the job, and he protects us from all harm. The one who

watches over all aspects of life in his garden does not go on vacation. It's not that he is against vacations. He knows we benefit from time away to rest, rejoice, and rejuvenate in the wonders of life in his world. But he is God, and he doesn't need a vacation.

I hope the Lord gives you some time off to rest and be refreshed and maybe even to travel and enjoy other places. Find peace of heart and mind as you reflect on how completely God watches over and cares for you.

Lord, thank you for watching over us and all things in your creation. Nurture us with the rest and refreshment you provide. In Jesus, Amen.

## THE PURPOSE OF DISASTERS?

*"Forgive and act . . . so that they will fear you all the time they live in the land you gave our ancestors."* —1 Kings 8:39-40

When mildew makes its debut in my garden, my first response is anger. I am indignant when bugs or worms or fungi come to ruin my plants. I get exasperated when I see evidence of animals invading the garden and stealing my harvest. Then, as rationality returns, I look for causes and remedies. I rarely, if ever, search my heart for wrongdoing or any fault of my own as a possible cause behind disasters in my garden.

Our verses today are part of King Solomon's prayer. The occasion is the grand opening of a splendid temple that the king and the people have built. After praising God's virtues, Solomon's prayer shifts to the predictable failings of God's people. Weaknesses—much less sins—are not readily detected or searched out. Most of us grow to realize our own faults slowly and painfully. By

God-gifted wisdom, Solomon knows this. He also knows that disasters in God's garden—like blight or locusts—can help bring us to our senses. So he prays, "When famine or plague comes to the land . . ."

Now, it would be a mistake to see every disaster as God's judgment on our sins. But seeing nothing of God in the disasters and struggles that come our way would be shortsighted. Minimally, God intends that disasters will prompt us to examine our hearts, extend our hands in prayer, and seek to honor him all the time.

Lord God, whatever disasters may come our way, turn our hearts to seek you and your mercy. May it always be our greatest desire to honor you and walk in your ways. Amen.

## SEEING THE HARVEST

*"I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest."*  
—John 4:35

I get very excited when the first red tomato, beans, zucchini, or anything ripe for picking appears in my garden. As soon as I see it, I eagerly tell my wife, children, neighbors, and anyone who will listen about the coming harvest.

When Jesus saw a ripening harvest, I'm sure it didn't escape his attention. Fields ripe with grain are among the most beautiful sights on earth. I like to think that his face lit up when he saw such a sight.

However, Jesus also saw much more. He looked beyond ripening grain and saw people in God's kingdom ready for harvest. A Samaritan woman of questionable character had come to know Jesus as her deliverer (John 4:4-26). And she was bringing to Jesus the very people who usually shunned her. This bold move resulted

in a wave of humanity flowing out to meet Jesus. This was the greater harvest that satisfied Jesus' deeper hunger.

What surprised the disciples about this encounter? From what we know about the strained relationship between Jews and Samaritans (John 4:9), it's fair to say that the disciples struggled to see the harvest among those whom they saw as enemies. Today Jesus' followers still struggle to see the harvest among people they dislike and tend to avoid. It's important that we hear Jesus telling us to look gently and humbly on everyone we meet.

Savior, deal a death blow to my prejudice and pride so that I can see people with your eyes of love and compassion, people that you came to seek and deliver. Amen.

## AN OVERWHELMING HARVEST

*"The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."*

—Matthew 9:37-38

At a certain point in the harvest season, I can feel overwhelmed. The tomatoes in my garden are ripening fast. Zucchini balloons to the size of watermelons. My back aches as I pick yet another row of beans. It takes me over an hour to pick a bucket full of raspberries. It's hard to keep up. In a video chat with my young granddaughter in California, I tell her to come next summer to help her Papa pick the tomatoes.

My eyes for seeing the kind of harvest Jesus is talking about began to develop during an internship on the south side of Chicago. There were so many people in great need of God's love and grace. Today's Bible reading reveals that the diseased, sick, harassed, and helpless are also numbered in the plentiful harvest. The crowd we see with Jesus makes the har-

vesting seem all the more labor intensive. Perhaps that explains the shortage of workers.

Did Jesus feel overwhelmed by the work of gathering this crowd—"like sheep without a shepherd"? Is this why he pleads for workers? Perhaps, but the plea is more about drawing us into his life of compassion for people who have suffered the thrashings of life.

Are we praying for ourselves to become workers in this harvest field? Pray this prayer and see where it takes you.

Lord of the harvest, overwhelm me with your compassionate vision for the harassed and helpless. Send me into your harvest field and equip me with your love. Amen.

## AN ABUNDANT HARVEST

*"The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do?'" —Luke 12:16-17*

This past year my garden was prolific. At the peak of its output of beans, squash, peppers, tomatoes, and more, we could not eat and preserve the produce fast enough. Secretly I took pride in the fruits of my hard work. And, strangely, the more I did that, the more possessive I became.

My father-in-law, who taught me most of what I know about gardening, has always been a wonderful corrective to my pride and perverse possessiveness. From time to time, he will say something like "You have good dirt."

The parable told by Jesus about greed has an even greater impact. Did you notice that "the ground" is the star of the show? The ground of an already rich man "yielded an abundant harvest." This is a humbling

reminder for all farmers and gardeners.

An abundant harvest depends on good ground and so much more. Blinded by pride in our own efforts, we lose sight of God, others, and the delight of being generous with God's gifts. In a word, we become fools in the sight of God, the good and perfect giver of life and of all that is needed for our lives. The person who is "rich toward God" is ever learning to be grateful and generous with the produce from God's garden.

Jesus, thank you for warning against "all kinds of greed" and the pride that fuels it. Teach me true humility that produces gratitude for your good gifts. and generosity that reflects a rich life in you. Amen.



## TRANSPLANTED

*You transplanted a vine from Egypt. . . . You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land.* —Psalm 80:8-9

I love raspberry bushes and their sweet fruit. Before my parents moved out of their home, I dug up as many roots from my father's garden as I could fit in the space I had carved out behind our new home. I transplanted and nurtured the roots until they became healthy plants. As I watched over these plants, they produced their pleasing fruit. The roots sent out shoots, and the patch grew.

Psalm 80 tells of a transplanted "vine from Egypt." The Lord God transplanted this vine with tender, loving care. The Lord protected it with shade and walls, and "it took root and filled the land." This vine is a picture of Israel, God's people, flourishing.

I am a shoot from a transplant. My grandparents immigrated more than 100 years ago. For the first couple of generations

my extended family remained planted in their faith and flourished. Over time, family ties and connections to the immigrant community loosened. In some ways this has been good. But connections with God and God's people have weakened or been severed for some, and the family tree has weakened.

The words of our text in Psalm 80 are nestled in lament. Something has gone wrong with the vine. God's people are in anguish, struggling outside of his favor and needing to repent. Is that the case for us too?

Lord, thank you for bringing us to places and times of flourishing. Help us to be faithful, and call us to repentance when we wander. Hear and forgive us, O Lord. Amen.

## TRANSPLANTS IN TROUBLE

*Restore us, LORD God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.*  
—Psalm 80:19

My affection for raspberry plants and their fruit has spread to giving away roots to family members and friends to transplant in their gardens. The recipients will also tell you that I regularly check up on those transplants. The people who have cared well for them beam happily as they share their enjoyment of the plants and sweet fruit. But the people whose plants are in trouble (due to poor placement, neglect, or being mowed down) would rather not talk about them.

God's extravagant love for his vine, his people, far surpasses my crazy love for raspberry plants. The writer of Psalm 80 asks God why he has broken down the walls intended to protect the vine. As a result, the fruit is stolen, and the vine is ravaged by wild animals and insects. The vine's stalks are even

cut down and burned. Most gardeners would feel justified in giving up on such a ruined vine.

Yet the psalmist boldly asks God to "watch over this vine"; the writer pleads, "revive us," "restore us," and "make your face shine on us." The plea and promise to be vibrant again is made solely on the basis that this root and its offspring belong to the Lord Almighty.

This is our only hope too, as God's people. When we stray and struggle, let's pray to be restored and revived also.

Lord God, when we are in trouble because of our waywardness, help us to call on you to revive us through your Son, who died for our sins to give us eternal life. Amen.

## FADING LIGHT

*Jesus told them, "You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before the darkness overtakes you."*  
—John 12:35

In early fall the dwindling harvest becomes noticeable. The air cools, and the leaves on plants, trees, and bushes begin to brown. The days grow shorter, and darkness comes earlier. It feels like a race against time to bring in the full harvest of fruits and vegetables.

This experience of fading light brings to mind Jesus' urging his disciples to walk while they still have the light—that is, Jesus himself. When Jesus spoke these words, his upcoming death on the cross was just around the corner. And that event became the most dramatic attempt to snuff out the light. But it was not the first attempt, and it wouldn't be the last.

In every age of human history, people who follow Jesus need to hear these urgent words. Jesus, the light of the world, has overcome the darkness by

his payment for our sin and his victory over death. But sin, the wickedness of the world, and the devil persistently continue in their efforts to snuff out the light. Apathy and complacency conspire within and around us to diminish the light. When we lose our sense of urgency, the harvest dwindles and the darkness moves in.

If you are noticing the dwindling light, what are you doing about it? Are you making the most of every opportunity to be the light of Christ and bring in the harvest?

Jesus, inspire me to follow you faithfully. Shine in me and through my words and actions so that the harvest of lives will increase. Amen.

## PRODUCE OR PERISH?

*“‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it.’”*

—Luke 13:8

I planted blueberry bushes four or five years ago. The seller of the bushes said they should be producing well in three years, but so far we have enjoyed too few berries. More than once, I have been tempted to tear up those bushes and make room for other plants to use the space, soil, and sunlight.

Based on my limited experience, I might too quickly assume that limited resources and poor fruit production are the main issues in Jesus’ parable here. But that would miss the point.

Jesus tells this story to correct spiritual stupidity that runs deep in human thinking. Many people think that if something disastrous happens to someone, that person must have done something terribly sinful to deserve it. This secret and usually unspoken thought is drawn out

by Jesus’ questions in the verses leading up to his parable.

All of us are sinners. We all need to repent or perish. By our produce—the fruits of humility and compassion—we will be known. Compassion is extended by the merciful gardener who cultivates and fertilizes us in such a way that we will either produce or perish. The clock is ticking. The heart of the gardener and owner is that we produce the fruits of humility and compassion.

Gracious God, together with all people I deserve your judgment for not producing the fruits of humility and compassion. Thank you, Jesus, for coming to rescue and nurture those who repent and follow you. Amen.

## A TIME TO UPROOT

*There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: . . . a time to plant and a time to uproot.*

—Ecclesiastes 3:1-2

The end of the vegetable gardening season is a glad time and a sad time. In a good year, the harvest is healthy and heavy with bountiful beans, squash, tomatoes, potatoes, and all other kinds of produce. That's the glad part. The sad part includes the uprooting of plants that still look hearty and strong but have yielded their harvest. So I often feel a pang of loss and sorrow when I uproot my spent broccoli, bean, and tomato plants. Nevertheless, it must be done to prepare for the next season.

The profound beauty of Ecclesiastes is its down-to-earth approach to life "under the sun." While the time for planting may be more invigorating, the time for uprooting must receive its due. Embracing all of life and death as under God's care and control is a glad/sad business that is only wise.

I could have left my broccoli, bean, tomato, and other plants in the ground in the hope that they would weather the frost and snow and sprout new life in the spring, but such is not the nature of those plants. If I hope to enjoy the sprouting of new life, I will need to plant again in the spring.

So too with the seasons of life—doing what is required in each season is a sad/glad business that in Christ leads to the world to come.

God in heaven, thank you for ordering the seasons of the year and the seasons of our lives. Help us to rejoice in you, no matter what the season. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## CONTINUING FRUIT

*"Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. . . . They will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them." —Revelation 14:13*

When the bushes in my raspberry patch begin to mature and produce fruit, I try to protect the branches from breaking off. One day, however, I found a broken branch on the ground. And I was amazed to find that the fruit on it was still ripening and sweet.

That broken branch brought today's verse—and my mother—to mind. For the past few years my mother has been yearning to "go and be with the Lord." This is understandable, given her increasingly feeble body and fleeting memory. When she does depart this world, she will go on the wings of a promise being fulfilled. Her deeds will follow her.

My mother once said that she and my father used to wish for their children to have a better life (meaning more possessions) than they had. In later years,

that wish changed into a prayer that all her children and grandchildren would grow up to love and serve the Lord. As she has witnessed to us, that prayer has been and is still being answered. So, when she goes to be with the Lord, the sweet fruit of her prayers and deeds will continue to ripen and follow her.

All who die in the Lord are firmly in God's loving embrace through no merit of their own. Yet our actions have impact, and our deeds leave legacies. Do you have a legacy of witness?

Precious Lord, thank you for the guiding light of your promise that our faithful deeds will follow us. For this life and the next, inspire us by your Spirit to remain faithful to Jesus. In his name, Amen.

## MULTIPLICATION IN GOD'S GARDEN

*"Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."*  
—John 12:24

Plants and bushes multiply in a variety of amazing ways. Raspberry bushes send out runners from their roots and start new shoots. So my raspberry patch is ever expanding, and I am able to cut away plants easily for friends and family to start their own patches. Planting eight cloves of garlic before winter produces eight new garlic plants, and each plant produces seven or eight cloves of garlic the next summer—a good increase.

Jesus, an astute observer of life in God's garden, chooses wheat as an example of amazing multiplication. As he said, one kernel "produces many seeds." Today we know that one seed of wheat planted in the ground yields 20-25 kernels of new wheat. Further, Jesus was making a more profound point. Just as a wheat seed "falls

to the ground and dies" and then "produces many seeds," his own death and resurrection produce new life in a multitude of followers.

I have a stalk of wheat from the bouquet displayed on my father's casket 12 years ago. I keep that stalk of wheat to remind myself of Jesus' powerful promise. We can trust in his sure promise of multiplication and eternal life as we follow him in dying to ourselves and serving others out of the abundance of our new life in him.

Father, thank you for sending your one and only Son to die, rise, and multiply his life in all who follow him. Inspire and strengthen me to lay down my life and serve others. Amen.

## ANNUALS AND PERENNIALS

*So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable.*

—1 Corinthians 15:42

I came into gardening relatively late in life and had a lot to learn. I still struggle with differentiating between annual and perennial plants. Over the years, my wife has been patiently instructing me on which is which. Perhaps my confusion has something to do with the seeming vitality of both types of plants and the sad demise and death of the annual plants.

The book of 1 Corinthians was written, in part, to instruct confused Christians about the resurrection body. In some ways, the perishable body we have in this world could be compared to an annual plant—it fades and tragically dies. And the imperishable body promised in the new heaven and earth could be likened to a perennial—it lives on and on. However, according to this letter, the comparison breaks down. “The body

that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable.” An annual does not become a perennial—or could it? Recent research and experimentation reveal the genetics at work in annual and perennial plants. It seems that some genetic engineering can change an annual into a perennial.

If humans can change plants, surely God can change human bodies. The crucial transformation takes place in Christ’s death and resurrection. The bodies of all who follow him in life and death are planted like seeds—“natural bodies” and raised “spiritual bodies”!

Christ, you are our only hope in life and in death. Nurture our trust in you, that we may live with you forever. Amen.



## THE LOWS AND HIGHS OF GARDENING

*"They will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. . . . My chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands."* —Isaiah 65:21-22

A few years ago, we had to leave for a ministry assignment before we were able to reap and enjoy the harvest from our garden. We left it for family and friends to enjoy. While we were happy to do this, we knew that the garden would be untended and some of the harvest would be left to rot. That left me feeling a bit hollow.

My experience cannot begin to compare with the bygone days recalled for God's people by the prophet Isaiah. While there had been highs of tending gardens that yielded bountiful harvests, there had also been lows of being plundered by enemies—an aspect of the Lord's judgment on his unfaithful people.

The promise of today's verses is an aspect of the Lord's comfort for his people. He yearns to restore them to safe homes and bountiful gardens—to bless

the work of faithful servants. A more amazing reality is mentioned in the surrounding verses—a new heaven and a new earth. That might seem to be beyond our asking or imagining in this flawed world. Nonetheless, it is God's promise pointing to life forever with him, when Christ comes again. Tending my garden and enjoying its harvest reminds and comforts me with this mind-boggling reality that will come someday.

Are you looking forward to the time of Christ's return?

Lord God, thank you for tending my life with your Word, Spirit, and blessings of all that is needed for this life and the life to come. In Jesus I pray. Amen.

## GOD'S CONSUMMATE GARDEN

*He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"*  
—Revelation 21:5

It is difficult for me to really rest when there is work to be done in my garden. I want to have the garden perfectly weeded, cultivated, protected from pests, and perpetually producing a harvest of perfect fruits and vegetables. As you might guess, I have never been able to achieve all that, even if I compulsively push for it.

You could easily say I am being unrealistic—a dreamer. But I know this dream is rooted deeply in a desire implanted by our Creator. We human beings, created in God's image, were not created with death as our destiny; we were created to cultivate culture, to tend and develop creation. God's world was not formed for ultimate ruin. The Lord's affirmation "I am making everything new!" is made at the end of human history as we know it with all its

sorrows, and at the beginning of the new heaven and earth that will continue eternally.

Many observers have pointed out that God's revelation about our life with him begins in a garden and then begins anew forever in a garden-city. We see rich echoes of Eden's rivers and trees in our verses for today, and we see that our life with God will be consummated in a perfect garden in a new heavenly city. I am eagerly looking forward to an unfettered, full life of gardening and growing with God's people in the new heaven and earth.

"My God, how wonderful you are!" We look forward to creation's liberation from decay and death and our wonderful freedom as children of God in the new heaven and earth! In Jesus, Amen.

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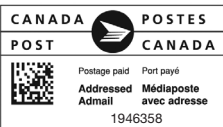
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