

Today

Nov/Dec 2017

refresh, refocus, renew

Jesus'
EXTENDED
Family



ALSO: LOVING ONE ANOTHER

Friends:

Some years ago I took up a study of my family history. I wanted to know how I, my parents, and my grandparents all came to be where and who we are. Who in our family first came to North America? Where did they live before they came here? What did they do for a living? Were there any scandals or skeletons in our family closet? Eventually I found quite a few answers, including some surprises, tragedies, and disreputable episodes.



Jesus of Nazareth has a long and strange family history—including not only the scandal of a pregnant maiden but also accounts of heroes and scoundrels, kings and prostitutes, reaching back centuries. These are the kinds of people God used to work out his story of salvation for us.

In December, Pastor Thea Nyhoff Leunk walks us through the family connections of Jesus, exploring how God brought his salvation through Christ by way of all kinds of interesting and broken people.

But first, in November, Pastor George Vink explores how we are called to care for and love one another in Christ. How we love each other is a direct reflection of how we truly love God.

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

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Steven Koster". The ink is dark and the strokes are fluid.

—Steven Koster

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"Loving One Another"
George Vink



"Jesus' Extended Family"
Thea Nyhoff Leunk

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TODAY (USPS 185-140),
Volume 67, Number 6,
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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Printed in U.S.A.

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Cover photo Unsplash/Jamie
Macpherson



ReFrame
Media

november

Loving One Another

George Vink

Living as a Christian in today's world requires an awareness of our relationship with our Creator, Redeemer, and Provider as well as an appreciation for our relationships with each other. The Bible addresses these by making clear that our relationship with God is complete only in Christ Jesus and that our relationships with others as God intended are happiest when they follow the example Jesus set: "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34). So how do we express that love?

We find many passages in Scripture that call for loving one another in our relationships with people as we reflect our relationship with Christ. As a pastor, I have often illustrated this by referring to a cross: a strong vertical beam represents our relationship with God in Christ, and a horizontal beam indicates the dimension of loving one another. The life of faithful obedience demands both.

This month we will explore our vertical relationship with God, and we will see how it affects our horizontal relationships with others. May we grow in grace as we seek to nurture all our relationships.

George Vink is a retired pastor who enjoys writing, consulting, traveling, and serving as an interim pastor, doing so together with his wife of over 50 years, Shirley. They also enjoy visiting their four children and 11 grandchildren in various parts of the United States and Canada.

THE ULTIMATE COMMAND

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.

—Romans 13:8

My wife and I had a decision to make about our family car. Did we need a new one or a “gently used” one, or should we repair our faithful but tired sedan? For us as aging pensioners, was it time for a model that would be easier to get in and out of? We also considered options such as heated seats, a navigation system, and a host of add-ons with price tags attached. Models, options, and whopping prices—what a dilemma!

In comparison, let’s consider what options we have for living as followers of Jesus Christ. In the Christian life, what is nice to include but not really necessary? And what, like the steering wheel on a car, is absolutely essential? When we lived in California, air conditioning was necessary. Could following God’s commands be similarly regionalized and culturally

adapted? Christ’s command to his disciples the last time he ate with them is clear: “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”

The apostle Paul describes that love in some detail in 1 Corinthians 13, where we read, “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. . . . Love . . . always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

This month let’s look into some more specifics of Jesus’ command to “love one another.”

Lord Jesus, empower us by your Spirit to live with love in all our relationships, to the glory of God. May we honor you each day. Amen.

IT'S IN THE DOING

We love because he first loved us.

—1 John 4:19

John speaks directly to the heart of love as he writes, “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God.” Loving is not an abstract, optional concept. It originates with God, and we pass along God’s love in our relationships with others.

Lewis Smedes put it this way in his book *Love Within Limits*: “God’s love song is in many ways like other great love songs. . . . Our challenge is to find ways to bring the heavenly rhapsody down into our own worldly realities.” How true—and how difficult! Only one person, Jesus, lived out perfectly the demands of perfect love, and he was crucified.

Living with one another gets messy, and people can be so difficult! We live with family, friends, and neighbors who often seem determined to test even our desire to love. But

God didn’t command us to *like* one another. Jesus, after stating that the greatest commandment is “Love the Lord your God . . .” reminded everyone that the second is this: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39).

That is not an optional command. Jesus also described it as a new command and gave the reason for us to obey it: “As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34).

Jesus expects us to obey his commands. And he promises he will help us.

Lord Jesus, often we are difficult to love. Thank you for always loving us and being our example of patience and perseverance as we seek to love others in your name. Amen.

THE GREATEST IS LOVE

These three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.
—1 Corinthians 13:13

Loving one another isn't a matter of warm, fuzzy feelings and weak knees and pounding hearts. It's a matter of doing the right thing because that's what Jesus would do. Sometimes it can even bring unpleasant results for us. Loving often calls for doing the unexpected.

As followers of Jesus, we know that love is not something we can just opt to do or not do. It's a command from our Master, who showed us how to love. If we're asked why we are showing love, we can answer, "Because we're disciples of someone who loves us. We do it for Jesus' sake." What's more, we can show love only by the power of the Holy Spirit working in us. Then we're able, like Mother Teresa, to see that we're serving Christ by loving the people we interact with and serve.

Loving "one another" is often challenging. It may call us to love the strong-willed child or an aging parent or spouse angry with dementia. At home or church it may involve loving someone who is always negative and critical. At work it may be the coworker claiming to be indispensable while barely doing their job. It may mean foregoing a new coat so that someone else can have one. The "other" in our lives could be someone we don't even know but who comes to love Jesus because of something we did.

To whom will you show Jesus' love today?

Lord, help us to see others as you see them. Help us to be persons who show that we follow the example you gave us. For your glory and in your name, Amen.

SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. . . . And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom.

—Colossians 3:15-16

In the old Disney classic *Bambi*, Bambi's friend Thumper makes a wise statement that we should all take to heart at times. He admonishes Bambi, saying, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." Thumper's words are appropriate advice for gossipy people, but they don't always apply to healthy relationships. There are times when something "not so nice" needs to be said.

Seeking to be faithful followers of Christ Jesus, it's our responsibility to speak the truth in love. Christ's command to "love one another" addresses us as members of a body with deep concern for one another. "Teach and admonish," as our text puts it, could also be translated as "teach and instruct" or "teach and counsel." It's a matter of pointing one another in

the right direction, based on a genuine concern for people's well-being. And it must be carried out with the right motives, or our advice won't be heard. It requires an attitude of humility.

Living together in unity and harmony calls for bearing with each other and forgiving one another. We forgive because the Lord has forgiven us. Love binds all these actions together, making it possible for Christ's peace to rule in our hearts. Whenever we speak, may we do so with love, and bring peace.

Lord, help us to look into our own hearts for the right motive when we find we must instruct or admonish a fellow believer. We ask for your wisdom and humility, your love, and your peace. Amen.

DIFFICULT BUT NECESSARY

Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins. —James 5:20

If we've committed our lives to following Jesus as Savior and Lord, we're in a relationship with him and other believers. It's a relationship that includes teaching and correcting others. This means that when a fellow believer engages in a pattern of sin, an unacceptable way of life, we need to say or do something, even though we might rather not. Confrontation is never easy.

We begin by looking at our own life. Jesus warned about seeing the speck of sawdust in someone else's eye while ignoring the plank in our own eye (Matthew 7:3-4). But a love-led motive will be understood. It's important to see this as a ministry of mercy and a sign of genuine fellowship. Mutual admonition may be difficult, but love compels us to address destructive behavior.

The Bible urges us to warn against idleness and disruption and to encourage the disheartened. We should also respect those who work hard among us, such as the pastor teaching at worship today and the leaders of other ministries in the church. It's not easy to balance the tasks of admonishing the wandering, encouraging the fearful, helping the weak, and being patient with everyone.

Will you take time today to encourage those who lead you in the church community?

Father, empower us to see what we must do and what we must avoid doing as we seek to live together in love as fellow believers. In the name of Jesus, who did all this perfectly, we pray. Amen.

IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU

Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.
—Romans 12:10

There's an old saying that goes something like this: "If you see a turtle on a fencepost, you know one thing for certain: somebody helped it get up there."

Let's acknowledge that we all need help as we follow Jesus. Although our emphasis is on "loving one another," the operative word in all this is grace.

Romans 12 begins by urging us to offer our bodies "as a living sacrifice" in our worship of God. And as a result of our relationship with God, grace leads to loving relationships with others, in which we show God's love in tangible ways.

Our life in this world is not designed to revolve around ourselves. As we mature in our Christian walk, we realize we're not the only ones here, and, by God's grace, we become less selfish. Life centers less on us.

At one time we needed help, and we grow to help others.

This is a process. When you became a Christian, that doesn't mean you immediately love as Jesus does. But as you grow in devotion to God, you also become devoted to one another as believers, and you learn to honor others above yourself. The word "honor" implies giving something its proper weight, recognizing its importance and value to God. This process requires humility, courage, and perseverance.

In what ways can you honor others today?

Lord, we want to be less focused on ourselves and more focused on helping others be the people you designed them to be. Help us, in Jesus' name. Amen.

IT'S ALL ABOUT HUMILITY

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves. —Philippians 2:3

John the Baptist was someone who characterized the words of today's verse. He boldly proclaimed Jesus as being better than himself, considering himself not even worthy of being a slave to Jesus (Luke 3:16). It wasn't a matter of lacking self-esteem; John was just focused on the task he was called to do, not on himself. The growing follower of Jesus focuses increasingly on Jesus and less on oneself. As John himself stated, "He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30).

John's calling was to point people to Jesus. This is the same calling for every Christian—whether in the desert, the city, the suburbs, or the rural countryside. Every Christian is urged, "Honor one another above yourselves" (Romans 12:10). There is no room for power, prestige, or privilege in

the body of Christ. The emphasis must be on obedient service with an attitude of willingness to build up others. We honor those who serve by expressing our appreciation as well as following when they lead.

We can move from wanting the spotlight, to sharing it, to delighting when others are in it, to making sure others enjoy it. By valuing others above ourselves, we can express gratitude for all that God has done for us in Christ. God smiles when we live that way, showing we have the mindset of Christ himself.

Lord, thank you for these important reminders and examples of humility, pointing us the way to living faithfully for you. In the Savior's name we pray. Amen.

ROOM FOR DAVID, ROOM FOR ME

Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. . . . When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.

—Psalm 32:1, 3

Some people are reluctant to join a church because they wonder if they're "good enough" to belong. If you are a member of a church, would your fellowship let King David of Israel join? Why or why not? Would it make a difference if you didn't know his ancestry? And what about his sinful past? Psalm 32 reveals David's clear need to be forgiven. (See also Psalm 51.)

Many of us have been comforted and blessed by David's words here. When we confess, burdens are lifted. When we make things right with God and one another, joy returns and life's struggles become bearable. If we keep silent, trying to stuff our sin away, we find that our health, our attitude, and our relationships suffer. God may even use some drastic means to bring us around to confess-

ing. As David learned, God may lean on us a little—and his hand is heavy!

Our relationships must begin with a healthy relationship with Jesus, God's Son, who shows us how to relate to one another with unconditional love. This includes being part of a church and welcoming others into it. We all have to acknowledge the "I" problem at the center of sin. And when, like David, we confess our sins, we can rejoice in God's grace and forgiveness. Have you done so?

Gracious God, forgive us for failing to realize the damage of unconfessed sin. Lean on us, forgive us, and help us to show your love, forgiveness, and welcome to others. In Christ, Amen.

CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS

Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

—James 5:16

As we serve and bear with one another in our Christian living, sin will happen. It's unavoidable. Sin occurs and has consequences, and followers of Jesus Christ deal with both. We learn that we need Christ and his Spirit to help us avoid sin and to help us confess and forgive it when it happens. James advises us to "confess [our] sins to each other and pray for each other." That process leads to healing.

Though we often sin against one another in the church, we're also in the best of places to deal with it. We do so by acknowledging it, confessing it, and forgiving it, and that can even lead to forgetting it. Churches are made up of forgiven sinners who also become forgivers!

God can use forgiven and forgiving followers of Jesus Christ in amazing ways to attract

others into fellowship with him and with each other. People have even been known to say, "There's forgiveness and acceptance with those folks."

Confessing and forgiving are also the hallmarks of a healthy marriage and family. Just as God loves and forgives us, he calls us to love and forgive the people around us. When we have sinned against one another, we must confess. And then, though it can be difficult, we must also forgive, for we are called to love one another.

Jesus, you teach us to ask for forgiveness daily. Help us also to forgive any who sin against us. Give us the grace you have shown to us by your sacrifice for our sake. Amen.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.
—1 Thessalonians 5:11

Loving others includes encouraging one another. In Romans 12:7-8, Paul lists encouragement among the gifts of grace. When people accomplish a common objective together, all are encouraged. Fellow believers encourage one another to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).

The Thessalonian Christians faced struggles and an uncertain future. Paul wrote to encourage them, reminding them of their faith and love and hope in Christ, all of which prepared them to be ready for the Lord’s return. And with these assurances they could keep encouraging one another and building each other up.

The gift of encouragement is important in our lives. Encouragement is a gift in the home, the workplace, the church—

wherever we find ourselves. We can come alongside others and be there for one another. We can listen, comfort, console, affirm. It’s a way of living out the command to love one another.

Take time to recall the people who’ve been encouragers in your life. They’re the ones who were there when you thought you’d never laugh again. They were the ones who listened to you; whereas others just talked. Then ask yourself, “When was the last time I encouraged someone?” It’s not difficult, and the people you encourage are so blessed by it.

Lord Jesus, help me to recognize the struggler or the lonely—anyone who needs your encouragement of love and hope today. In your name, Amen.

THE URGENCY OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Spur one another on toward love and good deeds . . . encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

—Hebrews 10:24

The word for “encouraging” here means literally “to stand alongside.” It has to do with assuring someone that you care, strengthening them by just being there. It’s also similar to a word used to describe the Holy Spirit—*parakletos*, which means “counselor, advocate.”

Who needs to be encouraged today? We all do! Anyone who says they never need encouragement is probably a hurting person. There’s nothing wrong with needing encouragement. Jesus did. His Father encouraged him, saying, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22). An angel encouraged him as he struggled alone one night, knowing he would soon be arrested and crucified (Luke 22:43).

Our neighbors need encouragement. One may be a stu-

dent leaving home for college. Another may be a tired, frazzled mother facing the stress of child care and a strained marriage. Another may be a widower facing long, lonely days. Or perhaps there’s someone you have not seen at worship in a while. People who need encouragement are not far away.

Our children’s teachers, our worship leaders, pastors, elders—all of these folks need encouragement. Being a daily encourager can be an addictive but healthy habit. Loving by encouraging can bring energy and joy. Will you do it?

Gracious Father, thank you for sending Jesus, who knows all our struggles and challenges! Help us to encourage others in his name. Amen.

MORE ABOUT ENCOURAGEMENT

If your gift is . . . serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement.

—Romans 12:6-8

Encouragers are people who know Christ's love and live by his words: "As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34). Encouragers know that they have a gift provided through grace, and the Spirit works through them to build up God's people.

Whom are we called to encourage? The list is endless. Paul often encouraged new believers by visiting the churches he helped to start. It's also important that we encourage newcomers to the faith. They must not be left to fend for themselves; they need ongoing mentoring and encouragement in their new walk with Jesus.

We can also encourage followers who are timid, weak, and wandering. Kind words cheer up people who are discouraged by life and its complexities

(Proverbs 12:25). Well-chosen words make a huge difference!

God gives encouragement through the Holy Spirit so that we can be more like him, glorifying him as we do so. There's true joy found in encouraging others.

Encouragement can take the form of a gracious compliment, a simple meal, an appropriate hug, a brief visit, or a generous donation, reviving someone like water to a drooping plant. The opportunities are endless!

Whom can you encourage today?

Holy Spirit, empower us to be more Christlike in our encouragement of others as we journey through life together. Show us whom and how we can encourage in the name of Jesus and for his sake. Amen.

USING OUR SPIRIT-GIVEN GIFTS

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.
—1 Corinthians 12:27

Having had a few minor surgeries, I've grown aware and appreciative of the intertwined complexities of the human body.

Writing to the Corinthians, Paul describes the body of believers in terms of a human body to show how everyone depends on one another. This helps us to understand Christ's command to love each other. Our differing giftedness is for the common good, not for selfish pursuits or desires.

Early in his letter to the Christians in Corinth, Paul says, "You do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus" (1 Corinthians 1:7). And yet they were hardly an ideal congregation.

Today's teaching is clear. Every person in the body of Christ is important. And no body part

may tell another part that it's not important. Spiritually gifted believers must use their gifts for the common good.

With that in mind, we recognize that all followers of Jesus have gifts to be used to contribute to the whole body's well-being. The Holy Spirit empowers each of us to use our gifts and abilities for the good of others, guiding us to build up the body of Christ.

What are your spiritual gifts? Are you using them to God's glory?

Thank you, Lord, for teaching us that everyone in the body of Christ is important. Help us to know and appreciate our gifts so that we may use them to help others and glorify you. Amen.

LOVING MEANS USING MY GIFTS

Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. . . . Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others. . . .

—1 Peter 4:8, 10

Loving others includes using the gifts provided by God's Spirit. Each of us has talents and abilities we can use to bring glory and honor to God. In addition, we have spiritual gifts "for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). As we find in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, 1 Peter 4, and other passages, there are many gifts of the Spirit: prophecy, faith, giving, encouragement, wisdom, hospitality, and more. Each of us has at least one gift, and with it we can serve others and testify to God's grace.

Whatever gifts we have need to be used. That begins by recognizing and acknowledging what gifts we have. We need to discover our giftedness so that we can use it to express love. If we are reluctant or prefer to be modest in acknowledging our giftedness, let's remember

that God equips those whom he calls.

Whatever gifts we are given are to be used for the sake of others. Our communities and our families need us to use our gifts. The effectiveness of the body of Christ is diminished when even one person decides to "sit on the gift" entrusted to them. As an ancient confession of the church, the Heidelberg Catechism, puts it, "Each member should consider it a duty to use these gifts readily and cheerfully for the service and enrichment of the other members" (Q&A 55). Do you?

Father, help us to recognize the gifts you have entrusted to us for the sake of serving others. We want to honor you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

PRAYING FOR ONE ANOTHER

Pray in the Spirit on all occasions. . . . With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.

—Ephesians 6:18

A great benefit of the Christian community is that believers in Christ pray for one another. Our reading today urges us to pray “on all occasions” and “for all the Lord’s people” always. This is important because amid all the activities and busyness we may face each day, we’re in a struggle against evil. The forces of evil do not want us to love one another.

Praying for others is a pattern seen throughout Scripture—from Moses’ praying that God would be merciful to his people (Deuteronomy 9:26), to various psalms of David, to Daniel’s prayer that God’s people be freed from exile (Daniel 9), to the prayers of Jesus throughout his ministry, and to the prayers of his apostles for believers everywhere. The apostle Paul, for example, begins his letter to the Philippian Christians by as-

suring them that he is praying for them (Philippians 1:3-6).

There are so many people and situations we can pray for. When someone comes to mind, it may be that the Spirit is nudging you to pray. Praying may come more naturally to some than to others. But all of us can pray for others. All we need is to be open to the leading of God’s Spirit.

Do you pray for others? It’s an important part of fulfilling Christ’s command to love one another each day.

Lord Jesus, you taught us by example to pray for others. Help us to take time throughout our busy, complex days to pray for one another. Empower us with your Spirit. Amen.

TOO BUSY TO PRAY?

Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.
—James 5:16

A sign on a friend's desk states, "If you're too busy to pray, you're too busy!" But let's admit that we're often so busy that we lose sight of the importance of prayer. I have a hand-written, stern reminder to myself in the form of a yellowed piece of paper: "Busyness does not equal spirituality." In my work as a pastor, busyness was often an excuse for not praying.

Like the friends who carried a man with paralysis to Jesus (Luke 5:18-19), we can carry our friends to Jesus in prayer.

Interceding for others helps us to keep our focus. We live life in community. It's our duty toward fellow followers, journeying together in an unfriendly world.

We can never underestimate the power and importance of praying for one another. It's necessary, beneficial, and

entirely appropriate. Ephesians 6:18 teaches us to "pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests."

Sometimes our prayers may be a few words of confession or lament; at other times we may be asking for wisdom in how to deal with a delinquent child.

Praying isn't a separate segment of living in a complicated world. It's what a hymn declares: "While I breathe, I pray." Is that true for you?

Father God, you heard the prayers of your Son, Jesus, and you hear my prayers. Lead and guide me as I follow you today and every day. In Jesus' name, Amen.

"I'M PRAYING FOR YOU; PLEASE PRAY FOR ME"

God . . . is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times.
—Romans 1:9-10

Our prayers need a balance of praise, intercession, thanksgiving, and confession. It's important for us to remember that praise cannot really take place until there's a confessing of sins that might be hindering our prayers. We cannot pray effectively if things aren't right between ourselves and God as well as between ourselves and our neighbors. Jesus leaves little doubt about it, teaching us to ask daily, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12).

Praying for one another is our calling as we journey in faith together. In his book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, "Intercession is a daily service we owe to God and our brother. It's a gift of God's grace." It can happen in worship as well as while driving to work. Praying Christians pray anytime and

anywhere—and they truly make a difference.

While we pray for others, we must not be afraid to ask others to pray for us. Life is complicated for everyone. When praying for others or asking for prayer, our bond of unity is strengthened. Our attitude toward those for whom we pray often changes us. After all, Jesus calls us to love even our enemies, and he says, "Pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).

As a follow-up to praying for someone, consider sending a note of encouragement: "I'm remembering you in my prayers." And you might also add, "Please pray for me too."

Help us, Lord, to keep praying for each other and growing together in your grace and love. Amen.

ACCEPTING ONE ANOTHER

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.
—Romans 15:7

Have you ever felt rejected when you wanted to belong? It can be very hurtful. God made us to be in relationship with one another. That's why the Heidelberg Catechism's answer to "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" is so powerful: "That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ." We desire acceptance and relationship. It's comforting to know Christ has accepted us. And by accepting one another as Christ did, we honor God.

But how well do we do at accepting one another? How well do we mirror Christ's love and acceptance? We know that we are called to become more like Jesus. But so often we build walls instead of breaking them down. And that's not Christlike.

God's Word leaves no room for superiority thinking. Believers

are called to be accepting of one another with the standard set by Christ himself, realizing that there are the weak and the strong, the strugglers and the achievers. In our churches and our relationships, we've got to make sure that people experience acceptance. We show this by including them and accepting them as they are.

Accepting includes making others feel they belong. Those who confess "I belong to Jesus" know that they have been accepted by Christ. Will you accept them too?

Lord Jesus, thank you for accepting us as sisters and brothers. We're so glad to belong to you. Help us to welcome others into the same relationship, to your glory. Amen.

ACCEPTANCE WITH NO FAVORITISM

Believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.
—James 2:1

The Bible makes clear that believers in Christ, enjoying the gift of God's acceptance by grace, may not show favoritism, treating some people as better or more worthy than others. This follows from God's own practice of accepting all who call on his name (see Acts 10:34-35; Romans 10:9-13).

James gives a specific example about favoritism in action, showing that there is no room for discrimination in God's kingdom. He adds, "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right." We must not miss this: Loving means accepting one another!

We accept others when we make room at our table or in our circle of friends for someone we may not know. It's more than being friendly. Jesus said, "Anyone who welcomes

you welcomes me" (Matthew 10:40). Jesus identified with people who were poor, hungry, strangers, sick, and in prison. We must do this too.

Loving one another means getting involved in the lives of others—as messy as that may be. It could involve inviting someone to join a Bible study at your home. It could even be uncomfortable. But you can do so, remembering that few are offended by Jesus. Accepting one another as Jesus did honors God and brings rejoicing in heaven. To whom can you show God's love today?

Lord, help us to follow your example and seek your kingdom in the way we love one another, whatever may be involved. We want to honor you in all we do. Amen.

LIVING IN HARMONY IS NECESSARY

*Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.
Live in harmony with one another.* —Romans 12:15-16

Wise believers acknowledge that when Jesus said, “A new command I give you: Love one another” (John 13:34), this was not simply a suggestion for getting along. So too, the Bible’s commands as to how we treat one another shouldn’t be considered optional. That’s not the nature of God’s commands.

As Christ’s followers, we must remember how our relationship with God affects our relationships with each other. When we pray, “Our Father,” we acknowledge that we are part of a family that includes sisters and brothers. We’re called to live in harmony together. Today’s reading mentions specific ways of doing so, such as honoring one another above ourselves, holding to what is good, praying faithfully, sharing with people in need, showing hospitality, and not being proud.

When believers live in harmony, expressing their love for one another by sharing tears in times of sorrow and expanding their joy by celebrating together, they become appealing witnesses to their hope in Christ. When a coworker observes, “It’s amazing how you guys love each other,” the cause of Christ moves forward. Jesus taught this when he prayed that all believers “may be one” and “may be brought to complete unity. Then,” he said to the Father, “the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:22-23).

Father, we want to live with others in such a way that shows we are in a life-giving relationship with you. Grant us your Spirit to do so. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

GETTING ALONG IS ESSENTIAL

God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.
—1 Corinthians 1:9

Paul diligently taught that God is faithful, calling people into fellowship with his Son. And for the sake of being faithful witnesses for Christ to the world, it's essential that all who are called into this fellowship live in unity and harmony.

But things weren't going that way in the church at Corinth. And Paul minced no words in addressing the problem in this letter to the believers there.

He began his letter noting his thanks to God for the grace and spiritual gifts given them. And after reminding them of God's faithfulness in calling them into fellowship, Paul appeals to them "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." He calls them to "agree with one another," and he admonishes them, demanding an essential unity of "mind and thought." There was to be no room for divisions. Instead,

love, unity, and harmony are to be the signs of Christ's presence.

When believers forget what unites them, they focus on externals such as who baptized whom, or who follows which leader, or who comes from what nation, or who has what skin color, or who has the most money. Our harmony is not to be based on our common preferences or interests. Ego-driven divisions have no place among us. Our allegiance to Christ must be expressed in our love for one another. It's essential!

Lord Jesus, help us to live out our relationship with you and your church in such a way that our harmony and fellowship testify to your love for a hurting world. In your name, Amen.

FREE TO SERVE ONE ANOTHER

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.

—Galatians 5:13

Occasionally my older siblings tease me about my desire to express my freedom as a toddler. Shedding clothes, I'd run down the street. Mom would send an older child to bring me home. Was I indulging sinful attitudes at such a young age? Maybe!

What is this freedom that Paul warns us not to misuse? Is it the freedom of basic human rights that we enjoy in Western nations? Hardly! There are people in prison as well as in other countries who enjoy the freedom Paul is talking about—it's the freedom that only the gospel brings, freedom from our slavery to sin and to legalistic moral attitudes.

The Galatians had enjoyed this freedom when they believed the gospel of Christ, but it seemed they were about to be enslaved again by sin and legalism! Freedom is precious. It's

bought with the priceless blood of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

President Lincoln understood something about the precious value of freedom. Signing the Emancipation Proclamation to free slaves in the United States, he made sure his hand was steady before writing his name. Signing firmly, he stated, "I don't want it to look as if I hesitated."

The good news of Jesus sets people truly free. It's the freedom that brings new life and calls us to use it to serve others.

Lord Jesus, we rejoice in the freedom you won for us on the cross. Empower us to live by it in all our relationships. We pray in your name. Amen.

FREEDOM LEADS TO HUMBLE SERVICE

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. . . . Serve one another humbly in love.

—Galatians 5:1, 13

Paul was astonished at how quickly the Galatian believers were giving up on the gospel he had brought. And it wasn't for an easier freedom; people were going back to being burdened with rules and rituals. Paul's message: the freedom bought by Christ's blood must not be forsaken so readily. It's too precious! It's a freedom designed to lead to showing Christ's love to others by humbly serving in whatever ways we are gifted.

Living as people who are freed in Christ, we're called to walk the "narrow road," avoiding the ditches of legalism on one side and lawlessness on the other. Either ditch leads us astray. Freed from sin's yoke, we're free to serve—showing Christ's love! And in doing so, we humbly honor God for the precious freedom we have in Christ.

When we serve one another in love, we're following Christ's example and obeying his command (John 13:34). This can include a willingness to literally go the extra mile and take someone to an appointment. Or to mentor a teenager or teach Sunday school. Or to serve in another way we are gifted. Fueled by grace, our freedom leads to serving others gracefully. Led by God's Spirit, we'll find ways to express our freedom by being a blessing. And in doing so, we too are blessed!

Gracious God, thank you for the freedom we have in Christ. Empower us by your Spirit to see where and whom we can serve for Jesus' sake. Amen.

THE NEW WAY OF LOVE

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

I hope that this month's consideration of "Loving One Another" has been showing that being a follower of Christ Jesus makes a difference in the way we live!

In the verses we have read today, we find some contrasts between our old ways of living and the new way of living in Christ. Though we are "made new" and "created to be like God in true righteousness," this is an ongoing process that is not completed in this life.

Today's reading gives reasons for our being called to live as "members of one body." We must live by the truth and avoid giving the devil any kind of foothold in our lives.

Because we can still be tempted to sin, we must pay attention to Paul's strong warnings about anger, stealing, unwholesome

talk, and grieving the Holy Spirit. We all can strive to be kinder and more compassionate, doing "what is helpful for building others up according to their needs."

And who has not harbored bitterness in their heart? What about "rage and anger, brawling and slander"?

Instead we must be mindful of "forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave [us]." In the Holy Spirit's power, we truly can "follow God's example" and "walk in the way of love."

Spirit of God, empower us to understand more clearly your call to acts of kindness and compassion. Guide us to be forgiving and loving, like Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

KINDNESS, COMPASSION, FORGIVENESS

Be kind and compassionate . . . forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Follow God's example, therefore . . . and walk in the way of love. . . .
—Ephesians 4:32-5:2

Urging us to “live as children of light,” Paul calls us to “walk in the way of love” as “God’s holy people.” As Christ’s followers, we adopt a lifestyle of imitating God, showing kindness, compassion, and forgiveness. We learn to forgive because we know that God has loved and forgiven us.

As a pastor, I have often been asked me to preach on forgiveness. I usually focus on the theme that people who are *forgiven* must be *forgiving*. If we do not appreciate God’s forgiving us, we have little motivation for forgiving others. Forgiven believers with grateful hearts readily express kindness and compassion for others.

Many Bible passages like Psalm 103 show us that God is forgiving, loving, compassionate, and gracious, and we can imitate our heavenly Father, treating

people with compassionate, gracious love.

Kindness, compassion, and forgiveness are inseparable. We can’t be very kind to someone whom we haven’t forgiven. We won’t show compassion until we grow aware of how much we’ve experienced God’s love and compassion.

As Jesus’ followers, we’re called to share the love that he has shown for us. Doing so builds healthy relationships, honors our Creator, and grows his kingdom.

Forgiving Father, thank you for your love and forgiveness. Help us to show kindness and compassion to others because you’ve shown it to us. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

LOVING MEANS SUBMITTING

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

—Ephesians 5:21

In a sermon I asked, “What is the best way to teach children?” And the congregation answered enthusiastically, “By example!” As a pastor, I had often quoted Albert Schweitzer, saying, “Example is not the main thing in influencing others. It is the only thing.”

Jesus taught by example what he expects from us. Facing the cross, he illustrated submission and leadership at the last supper with his disciples when he washed their feet and said they should now serve one another (John 13:3-17).

The concept of submission is often misunderstood. It isn't a matter of allowing others to walk all over us. As Paul applies it to marriage in Ephesians 5, submitting means that both the husband and wife seek their partner's well-being. It's not a hierarchy! It's not about

authority but about serving one another—and doing so “out of reverence for Christ,” who gave up his very life for us.

When the mother of James and John asked for places of authority for her sons in Jesus' kingdom, Jesus explained that lord-ing it over others is not the way of the kingdom. He urged them to follow his example: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Whom can you serve and build up, for Jesus' sake, today?

Lord Jesus, you call us to live in relationship with one another, but sometimes it's so difficult. Help us see how we can serve and build up one another out of love for you. In your name, Amen.

SUBMISSION INVOLVES SERVICE

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

—Ephesians 5:21

There's more to being a Christ follower than talking about Jesus or rejoicing in being "saved." Too often we emphasize our personal, "vertical" relationship with Jesus without thinking how that should affect our "horizontal" relationships with others, where life can be very complicated. Ephesians has some close-to-home application here, teaching that the reason for submitting to one another is "out of reverence for Christ."

Explaining Jesus' command that we "love one another," John Calvin stated, "Where love reigns, there is mutual servitude," adding that this applies even to kings and rulers. They must serve their people, as must pastors and politicians. So must husbands and wives.

Applying Jesus' example to the marriage relationship, Paul mentions the "profound mystery" of

Christ and his church. Jesus is the head of the church, and yet he sacrificed himself for it. He's the model of service and submission for both the husband and the wife. It's a love relationship of serving and sacrificing for one another.

Loving and submitting means subordinating our "rights" and emphasizing how we can serve and build up one another. Our commitment to Christ leads to acts of surrendering self and submitting "out of reverence for Christ." Doing so will attract new believers. Have you tried it?

Lord, you submitted your will to your Father's. Help us to submit ours to you and to find ways of expressing love and respect in all our relationships. In your name, Amen.

LIVING MEANS LOVING

Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.

—1 Peter 4:8-9

In today's verses we're called to a way of life based on what Christ has done for us. He submitted and suffered, and we now await his return, when he will "judge the living and the dead." So Peter says, "Therefore, be alert. . . . Above all, love each other deeply. . . ."

In my Bible this section of 1 Peter is labeled "Living for God." This reminds me of an old song that begins, "Living for Jesus a life that is true, striving to please him in all that I do." I think Peter would have appreciated the word "striving" in these lines. He was someone who tried very hard but didn't always succeed. Yet he did learn that "love covers over a multitude of sins." Christ's love covered Peter's sins, and it covers ours too.

Peter says, "The end of all things is near," and then he explains

that we should remain alert, be in prayer, and focus on loving each other. In line with this he adds, "Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling." Peter would have understood hospitality as more than greeting people before or after a worship service. It also means more than having just our friends over for dinner. What about newcomers and those who are not like us?

Living for God means that our relationships with others are expressed in self-sacrificing ways, including real hospitality without grumbling. It could have amazing results!

Lord, we want to show our love for you in all we do. Empower us with the love and warmth of your Spirit, we pray. Amen.

TRUE HOSPITALITY

Love each other deeply. . . . Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.
—1 Peter 4:8-9

When we visit our son's family in California, our granddaughter would gladly give up her bedroom without grumbling. We're reluctant to impose, though, so instead we accept the hospitality of a friend's apartment.

In Peter's day, hospitality involved more than making room. Not only did a host focus on a guest's needs for food and shelter, but hospitality called for a warm welcome and kindness. It even had a certain ritual. On one occasion, Jesus reprimanded a begrudging host, pointing out what he had failed to do—no washing of feet, no welcoming kiss, and no anointing with oil—in other words, no hospitality (Luke 7:44-47). Ouch!

Hospitality calls for accepting someone as a friend—no longer a stranger. It flows from loving God. Today's Scripture provides some strong words about minis-

tering to people who were hungry, poor, strangers, or in prison. Hebrews 13:2 adds, "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it." God has invited us in; can we do any less for "the least of these brothers and sisters"?

Offering hospitality means being ready for the unexpected so that we can welcome people as Jesus did. We don't need a hotel to do so.

Lord Jesus, we look forward to your coming again to live with us in your kingdom forever. In the meantime, help us to offer hospitality to others in your name. Amen.

FROM THE HEART

Be filled with the Spirit. . . . Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father.

—Ephesians 5:18-19

The great opera star Enrico Caruso said a singer needs “a big chest, a big mouth, 90 percent memory, 10 percent intelligence, lots of hard work, and something in the heart.”

It is my constant prayer that the hearts of people who have heard the sermons I preached have been drawn to Christ and filled with his Spirit. It is also my prayer that these devotions on “Loving One Another” have helped *Today* readers in the same way. Having considered how service, confession, encouragement, and other qualities should be seen in the life of a Christian, I appreciate these words of Leon Morris, a New Testament scholar: “There is no point in accepting Christian teaching if we refuse to let it shape our lives.”

We are called to “live as children of light.” Such wise living

includes understanding what God’s will is for us and being filled with the Spirit. Being self-controlled, we become like Christ. We speak the truth, sing praises, thank God, and submit to one another.

Doing these things is not limited to worship gatherings. We must speak the truth always, sing praise from our hearts anytime, thank God for all things at all times, and always “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

With the Spirit of Christ filling your heart, in what ways are you shining the light of Jesus’ love in this world?

Lord Jesus, as you have loved us, help us to shine the light of your love wherever we are. Amen.

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Jesus' Extended Family

Thea Nyhoff Leunk

In the Bible we learn about many different people who were part of Jesus' extended family. Some are mentioned in Jesus' family tree (see Matthew 1; Luke 3), and many others are extended relatives within the people of Israel, descended from Abraham.

Reading through the Old Testament, I can't help noticing how fragile and imperfect many of these family members were: Joseph, an immature, arrogant teenager; Rahab, a former prostitute; Gideon, a coward; Jonah, a runaway messenger; and Mary, a young Jewish girl from a nowhere village. Yet these are important figures in the great narrative of God's redemption of the world.

God often begins with small things and inadequate people. And if God can use them in such marvelous ways, he can also use us—as unlikely or as unwise or as weak in faith as we may often be. This means we may not put limits on what God can do with small things, unlikely people, or even hopeless circumstances. That is the wonder of Christ's birth, which we celebrate at Christmas.

This month, in the season of Advent, as we look ahead to celebrating Christ's birth, let's meet some of Jesus' forebears and extended relatives in the ages-old family of faith, all of whom are our spiritual ancestors.

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A SHOOT FROM A STUMP

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

God's people had forgotten God; they had forgotten his call to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with him (Micah 6:8). God grieved at this because he had planted the people "like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock" (Jeremiah 2:21) and had expected them to grow and flourish and carry out his purposes in the world. But they had become wild and corrupt. The prophets warned that there would be consequences, and the people faced seventy long years of oppression in exile in Babylon.

But in the midst of this tragedy, Isaiah speaks the sweetest words of hope the people could hear. Though the family line of King David, son of Jesse, had been cut down to a stump, out of the deep, thick humus of human faith and suffering a tender new shoot would grow.

This little green sprig would be a sign of something new springing from the old.

We, too, long for deliverance from oppression in our slavery to sin. So even as we anticipate the birth of Jesus the Branch, the new shoot from the stump of Jesse, we also anticipate, in hope, a second coming of Christ. We await the completion of God's promises of salvation—when God will free from sin's grip his well-loved creation and come to live with us forever.

Are you longing for that day?

O come, Emmanuel, and ransom your people, who mourn in lonely exile. We long for the day when you will come and set us free from sin and death forever. In your name, Amen.

IN HIM THE GENTILES WILL HOPE

"The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope." —Romans 15:12

The season of Advent is about hope—and not just hope for a better day or an end to suffering, but also hope that our human existence has meaning and possibility beyond our present situation. This is hope in God, who makes things new and with whom "all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).

God's people wanted a mighty Messiah to come and change their oppressive circumstances. They were deeply disappointed when that didn't happen. But that was a short-sighted view of hope. Our hope cannot be in circumstances, no matter how badly we want them to change. God's people experience oppressive circumstances in the same ways that others do. They get sick, they are victims of violence, and they get killed in accidents, in war, and, in some parts of the world, by hunger.

If our hope is only in a change of circumstances, we will always be disappointed. That is why we hope in God, who has continually, across the span of human history, revealed himself as a God of newness, redemption, and transformation. He is a God of possibilities who sees far beyond what we can think or even imagine.

This amazing God sent a Savior not just for the people of Israel but also for the Gentiles. He sent his Son to save the world—and that includes you and me.

In whom do you hope?

O Root of Jesse, during this season of Advent, draw us to you, give birth to hope in us, and show us how you can make all things new. In your name we pray. Amen.

FATHER ABRAHAM

"I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing."
—Genesis 12:2

Matthew's record of Jesus' family tree (Matthew 1:1-17) begins with Abraham. Why? Matthew wanted us to remember God's promises to Abraham.

God called Abraham to leave his country and go to the land God would show him. The Lord began to bring his greatest blessing into the world through Abraham and his family. And God made big promises to Abraham: a place to dwell with God, descendants as countless as the stars, and an opportunity to change the world. God would bless Abraham so that through him the entire world would be blessed.

Did Abraham ever see those promises come true? He did have descendants, but not very many by the time he died. The only land he owned at the time of his death was his burial plot. When we see that his descen-

dants continue through 2,000 years of history to include Jesus, however, we finally understand how those promises became fulfilled.

What's more, we, the followers of Christ today, are also spiritual descendants of Abraham (Romans 4:11, 16). And through Jesus, of the line of Abraham, all the people of the world are indeed blessed.

God kept his promises to Abraham. God will keep the promises he makes to us too. Though we don't always see the results in our lifetime, just as Abraham didn't, God is faithful.

Loving God, we rejoice that in Jesus your promises to Abraham came true. Help us to remember that you always keep your promises. Amen.

LAUGHING SARAH

Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me."
—Genesis 21:6

Sarah was ninety years old when she became the mother of Isaac (see Genesis 17:17). When the Lord visited Abraham a year earlier and said they would have a son, Sarah laughed to herself (Genesis 18:10-12). She likely thought it was impossible—and perhaps even ridiculous.

Yet later as she held her newborn son in her arms, Sarah understood that God was laughing with her. So she laughed again and urged others to laugh with her—not because the situation was funny or ridiculous, but because it was so wondrous. She even named the child Isaac, which means "laughter."

Abraham and Sarah's long years of disappointment at not being able to have a child ended as the joy of welcoming this baby boy filled their hearts. God had indeed brought laughter and

hope, the beginning of the fulfillment of his promise to make them a great nation (Genesis 12:2).

God's faithfulness to Sarah and Abraham is one example of how God is faithful to us. God wants to bring all of us laughter and joy.

The world's disappointing and long years of waiting turned to a new hope with the arrival of another baby boy: Jesus. That's what the season of Advent is about. It's also about Christ's coming again to bring an end to sin and death and sorrow.

Joy to the world—our Lord is coming!

Dear Jesus, we await the celebration of your birth with joy as we prepare our hearts for you. Amen.

ONLY SON ISAAC

Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.

—Genesis 22:8

We can only wonder what Abraham was thinking on the way to Moriah with Isaac. When Isaac asked about the lamb for the offering, we can only guess why Abraham answered the way he did: "God himself will provide the lamb." Did Abraham say this because he knew God is a loving God and would never really make Abraham sacrifice his son?

Unlike the false religions of the neighboring peoples, belief in God does not call for human sacrifice. But God does demand other kinds of sacrifices. God demands that nothing can mean more to us than loving and serving him. Perhaps in this test of Abraham, God was asking, "Do you love me more than even your precious son?" Abraham's answer, shown by his obedience and trust, was "Yes."

This story points to another story of sacrifice, which shows that God loves us so much that he "did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all" (Romans 8:32). Jesus didn't come just to be a great teacher. He came to be the final sacrifice for our sins. His death on the cross ended the curse of sin and death for us. That's how much God loves us.

How much do you love God? Enough to give your all "as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing" to him (Romans 12:1)?

Thank you, Jesus, for coming to be the sacrifice that takes away our sin. Thank you for loving us so much. May we give our all to you each day. Amen.

BELOVED, COMFORTING REBEKAH

Isaac . . . married Rebekah. So she became his wife, and he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

—Genesis 24:67

Abraham wanted his son Isaac to marry a woman from among his relatives in his old homeland, so he sent a trusted servant to find Isaac a wife. The servant asked God to show him who this woman would be, and Rebekah was the one!

As it turned out, Rebekah was a granddaughter of Abraham's brother Nahor. And she courageously agreed to leave her parents and move to a country far away to live with people she had never met and to marry a man she had never seen.

As she arrived with Abraham's servant and camels, Isaac noticed them from across a field and went over to greet them. They met and married, and Isaac loved Rebekah. What a wonderful statement!

Rebekah found a new family with Isaac, and Isaac found a

person who could bring healing to his grief over his mother's death.

When we are mourning the loss of a loved one and we ask God to comfort us, sometimes God provides comfort through another person, someone who sympathizes with us and understands our pain and grief.

Are you mourning today? May God provide you with someone who can comfort you.

On the other side of the coin—are you someone who can provide comfort to a mourning friend? Can you stand beside them in their grief?

Dearest Jesus, comfort all who mourn today. Bring your peace and love into their grief. In your name we pray. Amen.

LOVELY RACHEL

Laban had two daughters. . . . Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful. —Genesis 29:16-17

Because of their father's trickery, two sisters were married to the same man. Rachel was the only one loved by the husband, and Leah was the only one able to bear children. In the culture of that day, these sisters were destined to constantly compete against each other. Leah had children and wanted Jacob's love; Rachel had Jacob's love and wanted children.

Despite the fact that Jacob loved her and she was beautiful, Rachel's life was not a happy one. In those days it was considered a disgrace to be unable to have children. But God "enabled her to conceive" after long years of waiting, and Rachel had a boy, whom she named Joseph (Genesis 30:22-24). Later, Rachel died giving birth to another son, whom Jacob named Benjamin (Genesis 35:16-20).

The longing for love and respect from family members is still a part of our lives today. It hurts when one person loves someone more than they are loved in return. Our deepest human need is to be loved and to love in return.

But we can't earn love; it can only be given. Jesus' coming as our Savior is the most vivid example of God's shouting out to us how much he loves us. God loves us, just as we are—whether or not we are beautiful or lovable. With God, we can live life fully, knowing that we are deeply, dearly loved.

Have you accepted God's love for you? And, in return, are you sharing that love with others?

Dear God, thank you for loving us so much that you sent your Son to save us. In his name, Amen.

WRESTLING JACOB

Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.

—Genesis 32:24

Having stolen his brother's blessing from their father, Isaac, Jacob left his family and went to live with his uncle Laban (Genesis 27-28). Then, after many years, Jacob returned to reconcile with his brother Esau.

The night before the brothers were to meet, a man came and wrestled with Jacob in a match that ended in a tie. Only after the struggle was over did Jacob learn that he had been wrestling with God, who said to him, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel."

This new name, Israel, was a symbol of how God was changing Jacob's life. Jacob would no longer be an ambitious, sly deceiver, but a receiver of blessings who would struggle with God and prevail.

The baby whose birth we celebrate at Christmas had a name

that symbolized who he was too. Immanuel means "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). Just as God was with Jacob his entire life, God is with us too, and he has promised: "I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

Like Jacob, we can take great comfort in knowing that God is with us in every step of our journey. And if God is for us, then nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

Immanuel, you came from far beyond our reach to be with us and for us. We know that nothing can ever separate us from your love. Abide with us forever. We pray in your name. Amen.

DREAMING JOSEPH

"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

—Genesis 50:20

Joseph was a teenager who lacked common sense. When two dreams revealed that his family members would bow down to him, he eagerly told all those who were the least likely to appreciate them! His brothers hated him so much that they sold him into slavery. In Egypt, after a roller-coaster ride of ups and downs, Joseph became the chief deputy to Pharaoh, king of Egypt. When a famine brought the brothers to Egypt to buy food, they were reunited with Joseph. Their father, Jacob, was also reunited with his long lost son.

After Jacob died, the brothers wondered if Joseph would now punish them for their awful deed. But Joseph delivered a jaw-dropping response: *You meant to harm me, but God turned it into good and saved many lives.*

Advent reminds us that God is able to turn evil intentions into results that are good. We can't always see how God does this; God's ways are not our ways. But God is always working to do good. We see it in the life of Joseph and in the story of Jesus. When Jesus died on the cross, God took the evil of the crucifixion and transformed it into everlasting salvation for all who believe in Jesus as Savior.

Despite all our sins, God is always surprising us with the ways in which love can conquer hatred and forgiveness can overpower sin. Have you experienced God's love in your life?

Lord, thank you for always being at work to turn evil to good. Thank you for sending Jesus to endure the cross so that we may live. Amen.

FLOATING MOSES

She named him Moses, saying, "I drew him out of the water."

—Exodus 2:10

In Egypt the Israelites (Hebrews) flourished for generations, and eventually the Egyptians felt threatened. So the ruling Pharaoh decided that all Hebrew baby boys should be drowned at birth (Exodus 1). But one boy survived that holocaust—his mother hid him in a basket-boat among the reeds of the Nile River, and Pharaoh's own daughter found him and decided to raise him.

Brought up as a prince in the king's family, this baby was named Moses, because the princess pulled him out of the river and saved him. He grew up to be the liberator of his people, chosen by God to lead them back to their own land.

Another king many years later massacred children too. Out of fear and hatred, King Herod tried to kill all the baby boys in Bethlehem after hearing that

a new king had been born there (Matthew 2:13-18). Like Moses, one of those babies survived. He was the child Jesus, and he grew up to be the Savior of his people—and of all other peoples too—from the curse of sin and death.

Salvation comes to us through this baby boy, the Son of God, who was born into the family line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Israel). He took up his human life to show us that our story isn't about death, slavery, and oppression. Our story is about freedom, hope, and liberation—all found in our new life in Jesus Christ. Do you believe in him as your Savior?

Lord, we pray for all who are persecuted or oppressed. Let them discover the Christ as their Savior and liberator. Amen.

PROPHET MIRIAM

"Sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea."
—Exodus 15:21

Moses' sister Miriam had watched over her baby brother while he floated in a basket in the Nile River (Exodus 2:4, 7). And many years later, when Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, Miriam was there also.

The journey out of Egypt became treacherous when Pharaoh changed his mind and chased Israel down to make them his slaves again, nearly pinning them against the seashore. But God led the people through the sea on dry land, and when Pharaoh's army tried to pursue them through the crossing, they drowned.

What a miracle! What a mighty deed to celebrate! So Miriam prophesied in a song celebrating God's amazing rescue of her people.

Many years later another woman prophesied in a song cele-

brating God's amazing rescue of her people: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. . . . He has performed mighty deeds" (Luke 1:46-55). She was singing about a baby who would soon be born to her; he would lead his people out of the slavery of sin and through the waters of baptism to new, everlasting life. That woman was Mary, and when her son was born, they named him Jesus, which means "Savior" (Matthew 1:21).

As we look forward to celebrating the birth of Jesus, our Savior, may we too rejoice in the mighty deeds God has done for each of us.

Our souls glorify you,
Lord, and our spirits re-
joice in you, for you have
done great things. Holy is
your name. Amen.

CONFIDENT JOSHUA

"The LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them."

—Numbers 14:9

After a long trek through the wilderness, the Israelites were within view of the promised land. Twelve spies were chosen to scout out the land. They returned describing a land of green pastures and rich soil and produce. But ten of them said that conquering the land would be impossible, for they had also seen giants and fortified cities (Number 13:26-33).

The people whined and complained. But two of the spies, Caleb and Joshua, reminded everyone that God had promised that land to them, so God would make it theirs if they trusted him. But the people wouldn't listen and instead talked of killing Joshua and Caleb. So God decided that because of their grumbling and complaining, a different, more trusting generation would inherit the land. Forty years later,

God helped Israel claim the land under their new leader, Joshua. Joshua, whose name means "God saves," grew to experience God's saving power in many ways for his people.

Sometimes we can be afraid of what lies ahead. People and circumstances loom like giants, and problems seem impossible to solve. But we have a choice. We can stay afraid, or we can trust God to walk with us. We can do that because we belong to another whose name means "God saves"—Jesus. He was given that name because he would "save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Do you trust in the one who saves?

Jesus, when we face enormous problems and scary opponents, help us to call on you, the one who saves. Amen.

FAITH MODEL RAHAB

"The LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below."
—Joshua 2:11

Rahab took a great risk in hiding the two Israelite spies. She did that because she recognized the Israelites could not have crossed the Red Sea or survived forty years in the wilderness on their own power. She saw that God was the source of their strength. Though she was an outsider from Jericho, she understood who God is and what God can do.

Through the grace and mercy of God, this woman who was a prostitute and an outsider served as a witness to truth and a role model of faith. God used her story to remind Israel that they were not chosen because they were a great and mighty nation; they were chosen to be God's people because of God's compassion and mercy. God chose Rahab too.

Rahab became an ancestor of David. Matthew lists her in

Jesus' family tree, and the book of James names her as an example of Christian hospitality. The book of Hebrews also includes her in the roll call of heroes of faith. Rahab is our ancestor in faith. She saw that God was doing something new in the world, and God made her a part of it.

By faith, we also know that God is doing something new in the world. God is sending his Son to establish his kingdom everywhere. Soon we will celebrate his birth as we look forward with expectation and hope to his return to reign forever. Come, Lord Jesus!

You, Lord, are "God in heaven above and on the earth below." We bow in worship before you. Come, Lord Jesus, and usher in your kingdom. In your name, Amen.

MIGHTY WARRIOR GIDEON

When the angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior."
—Judges 6:12

God's people were being threatened by the Midianites, marauders who swooped down out of the hills to ruin crops and villages. God decided to raise up a leader who would defeat them. When the angel called him a "mighty warrior," Gideon thought the angel was joking. He was the least promising member of his family, which was the weakest clan in his tribe. He was only a farmer and didn't know anything about battling enemies.

But by the time God finished training Gideon for battle, he was leading three hundred men against 120,000 troops. It was an "impossible" mission, but with Gideon's small army God sent the Midianites running (Judges 7).

Like Gideon, we often resist the challenges God sets in front of us because we don't think

we are good enough or strong enough or skilled enough to meet them. But God doesn't ask us to do anything we cannot do.

The apostle Paul went through many trials in his life. But in Philippians 4:13 he wrote, "I can do all this through him who gives me strength."

Jesus showed by example how to depend on the Father for everything, regardless of what challenges we face. Thanks be to God that because of Jesus' victory over sin and death, "we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Romans 8:37).

Jesus, thank you for conquering sin and death. Help us to be your mighty warriors when you ask us to face trials and defend your name. Amen.

MOABITE RUTH

"Your people will be my people and your God my God."

—Ruth 1:16

Ruth the Moabite made a beautiful vow of commitment to her mother-in-law, Naomi. Ruth promised to walk alongside her, to change nationalities, to worship God, and to do this for the rest of her life. How did she come to make such a deep commitment? Could Ruth have seen and experienced the love of God through Naomi? She stepped out in faith to claim the promise of God's commitment.

Ruth's commitment to Naomi gives us a picture of God's commitment to us. In essence, God says to each of us, "I will go where you go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people." God has sworn that nothing in heaven and on earth will ever separate us.

In this Advent season we can celebrate how God came to us in the person of Jesus Christ. At tremendous personal cost, the

Son of God became one of us, a human being. Jesus went where we go, he lived as we live, and he even took on our death so that we would never need to be separated again from God's love or God's presence.

Listen to Jesus' words of commitment to us: "I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). May these words give you comfort and peace as you go through times of crisis. May they give you courage as you face the future.

Lord Jesus, thank you for the promise you have made to us to be our God. Help us to be your people. In your name, Amen.

REDEEMER BOAZ

The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer." —Ruth 4:14

In every clan in Israel the head of the family was considered the guardian-redeemer, responsible for the well-being of the family. This person was expected to rescue, ransom, buy back, recover, or redeem anyone or any property that was in danger of being removed from the family by poverty, war, or death (Leviticus 25:25-55).

Boaz became the guardian-redeemer for Naomi's family, and he was needed to fix two problems: a parcel of land had to be bought back (redeemed), and Ruth needed a husband. Boaz had to do some clever bargaining to redeem the land and marry Ruth, but he was successful, and the story of Ruth ended happily. Ruth gave birth to a grandson for Naomi to preserve her family name. What's more, these people became ancestors of Israel's great

King David—and of an even greater king, the King of the world, Jesus Christ.

God, of course, is the real guardian-redeemer in this story. God sent Jesus—a descendent of Ruth and Boaz—to pay the redemption price for our freedom, to restore us to our home in God's family, to rescue us from the evil that threatens us, and to give us a permanent home with him.

God's work in the world is always about redemption; it is always renewing, always loving, always good news.

Faithful God, thank you for coming to be our Redeemer so that you could restore us to your family. We know that our Redeemer lives! In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

WEEPING HANNAH

"I am a woman who is deeply troubled. . . . I was pouring out my soul to the LORD."
—1 Samuel 1:15

Hannah desperately wanted children. Every year, when her family went to worship at Shiloh, she judged herself to be a failure by her culture's standards. And one day it broke her. She sank into deep anguish; she couldn't eat, and all she could do was weep. No one could comfort or console her.

But despite the hopelessness of her situation, Hannah prayed and turned *to*, not *away from*, the Holy One, who "had closed her womb."

She begged God to attend to her forsakenness and grant her a son. In her prayer Hannah trusted that God heard her and cared about her and would answer her prayer. And God did hear and care; he also answered Hannah's prayer with the gift of a son.

When we experience dark days and seasons of grief and de-

spair, like Hannah we too can cry out to God and claim his faithfulness. In such moments we are called to remember the true story of our generous, gracious God—the God of hope, the God who will make right what is wrong in our lives, the God who will overturn all that causes grief in our world.

God has answered our prayers with the gift of his Son. Jesus is the answer to all our prayers, and we will soon be celebrating his birth on Christmas day.

Do you love and serve this Jesus?

Lord Jesus, when we are living in dark places, help us to remember that you are the light of the world who has come to show us the way to life. In your name we pray. Amen.

LISTENING SAMUEL

Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

—1 Samuel 3:10

Hannah had named her son Samuel, which means "heard by God." When he was weaned, she brought him to Shiloh to present him to Eli the priest for training as a spiritual leader of God's people Israel.

God called on Samuel to listen to and bring the word of the Lord to his people. God wanted Samuel to dedicate his life to this service. Samuel became a prophet, and he led Israel in that role for sixty years as Israel moved from a loosely organized group of clans to a peaceful monarchy ruled by King David, an ancestor of Jesus Christ.

We live under the peaceful reign of the one true good and just King today. "Peace on earth," the angels sang to shepherds watching their flocks on the night that King Jesus was born (Luke 2:14). Our Advent peace

is found in the birth of this child, who grew up to establish the kingdom of peace over all on whom God's favor rests.

Do you know this peace? Ask Jesus to rule in your heart and life, and he will welcome you into his kingdom of peace. Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, we can rest in true peace because we know he is our King and in control of all that happens in the world and our lives. This is a peace not "as the world gives" (John 14:27); it is God's peace, "which transcends all understanding" (Philippians 4:7).

Prince of Peace, we hear you call us to give ourselves to your service and your kingdom. Help us to answer your call. Please give us your peace. Amen.

KING DAVID

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

—1 Samuel 16:7

God sent Samuel to Bethlehem to anoint a new king. The current king, Saul, had failed to obey and honor God, so God decided to announce his choice of the next king.

Jesse's sons became the focus of Samuel's attention: a line of seven young men—starting with the oldest and tallest. Samuel made his way down the line, and as he stopped to look at each one, God told him that was not the one. Saul had been chosen king partly because he was tall and handsome, but this time God made a point of saying that height and appearance don't matter. God looks at what is inside—in the heart.

After Samuel reached the end of the line of Jesse's sons, Jesse informed him that his youngest son, David, was out in the fields tending sheep. David was chosen to be the next king because,

as Samuel put it, God "sought out a man after his own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14). God saw in David a heart that would commit to him without reservation.

God finds possibilities for grace in the most unlikely of people. To choose the youngest son to be a king seems strange. To say that a baby born in a stable, who dies on a cross under a false sentence of treason, is the Savior of the world and God in the flesh is incredible. But the mystery of Advent is that this is how God works—with the least, the weak, and the foolish. God likes to surprise us.

Lord, we are weak and foolish, but we know you can use us, like David, to bring your grace to your world. Amen.

TRUSTING HEZEKIAH

Hezekiah trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him.
—2 Kings 18:5

Describing the shoot that would come from the stump of Jesse, Isaiah portrayed a good and true king: “The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him. . . . Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist” (Isaiah 11:2, 5). If any king of Israel matched that description, perhaps it was Hezekiah. In the long line of the kings of Israel and Judah, no one else—not even David—was a more righteous king.

Why? Because Hezekiah trusted God and, like a shield clutched to his chest, he held fast to the Lord. Even in perilous situations, like when powerful Assyrian enemy seemed invincible, Hezekiah never doubted God’s ability to protect his people and save them.

From the Assyrians in Hezekiah’s time, to the Romans in Jesus’ time, to the superpowers

of our world today, no one is as powerful as the Lord our God. All of the victories God has provided point to one sure and certain victory, the victory we long for in this Advent season, the final victory of our King Jesus over the powers and principalities of this world. That is the victory we long to celebrate with cries of “Hallelujah! Our God reigns!”

Come, Lord Jesus, and show the nations and powers of this world that you are God alone.

You alone, God, rule this world. We long for the day when we can sing, “Joy to the world, the Lord has come!” Come quickly, Lord Jesus! In your name, Amen.

UNFORGIVING JONAH

"I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love."
—Jonah 4:2

The story of Jonah is among the most exciting stories in the Bible. But this book of the Bible is not named after a hero—Jonah is no hero. At the beginning of the story, he is running away from God, and at the end, he is arguing with God. The book of Jonah is more about God and how great God's love is. God never gives up on Jonah—not when he runs away and not when he sits under a vine and pouts (Jonah 4:6-9).

God saves Jonah from the sea storm by providing a great fish to swallow him and then to vomit him out later on dry land (Jonah 2:10). Jonah doesn't deserve to be saved, and yet God saves him and provides for him in extraordinary ways.

There's a name for what God does here—grace. Our God is gracious and abounding in love—even though we don't de-

serve his love. The grace God showed Jonah is the grace we receive through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

That's why Jesus calls his own burial and resurrection "the sign of the prophet Jonah" (Matthew 12:39). As Jonah was buried in the fish, Jesus was buried in the earth. As Jonah came out of the fish, Jesus came out of the tomb.

Jonah's story points us to Jesus' story, and Jesus' story tells us how far God will go on our behalf—all the way down to a manger, all the way up on a cross.

Lord Jesus, you came to be the friend of sinners. We are so glad because you are our friend and Savior. Thank you for giving us a second chance. In your name, Amen.

QUEEN ESTHER

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

"Why me?" Have you ever asked that question when someone asked you to do something or when something tragic happened to you?

Queen Esther may have felt that way when her cousin Mordecai suggested that she could use her position to stop the annihilation of her people. Mordecai reasoned that no one else among the Jews had such access to the king. So perhaps that's why God had made Esther queen—to be in a place to stop such a terrible evil from happening and save her people.

Esther knew what she had to do. She asked all her people to fast for three days and nights, and this would have included fervent prayers to God for deliverance. So when Esther walked into the king's throne room, she was wrapped not just in a beautiful robe but also in the prayers

of God's people. It wasn't just the king in that room; God was there too.

We must remember that God is always with us in our world too, preparing places, opportunities, choices, and options ahead of us. We have a God who cares. We can rejoice that nothing happens by chance and that even the sad and hurtful things of life are under God's control.

Praise God that we can wake up each morning knowing that God is faithful and will carry us through each day. Praise God that Jesus has come to stop evil from happening and to save his people.

Lord, when we are hurt and frightened, help us to remember that you watch over us and care for us. May we rest in your love today. Amen.

RETURNING ZERUBBABEL

"Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD . . . and may their God be with them."
—Ezra 1:3

For almost seventy years the people of God had been asking, "What did we do to deserve exile from our land?" The answer pointed to confessing that they had worshiped other gods and needed to ask the true God for forgiveness.

Empires rise and fall, and when the Persians overtook the Babylonians, God gave his people the opportunity to go home. Many thousands of people led by the prince of the line of David, Zerubbabel (also called Sheshbazzar), journeyed back to their devastated homeland surrounding Jerusalem.

The prophet Haggai had words from God for Zerubbabel at that important time. God said, "I am going to shake the heavens and the earth. I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms. . . . On that day . . . I will take

you, my servant Zerubbabel . . . and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you" (Haggai 2:21-23).

A signet ring symbolized a king's authority. God was giving Zerubbabel encouragement and hope. God was renewing his promises with his people.

By resettling his people in the land of promise, God prepared the nation for the coming of another son of David, the Messiah, Jesus Christ. He brought hope to people living in the ruins of their sins, providing strength to rebuild their lives. That hope is ours too, as we look toward the birth of Jesus.

Lord Jesus, you have such plans for us. Thank you for the hope we have in you. Amen.

CUPBEARER NEHEMIAH

"They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand."

—Nehemiah 1:10

About 70 years after the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem was rebuilt, Nehemiah, cupbearer to the king of Persia, heard reports of trouble and disgrace there. The walls of the city were still lying in ruin. In those days, a city's walls offered protection and security. If Jerusalem was going to flourish, it needed strong walls. Nehemiah wept because his people needed a safe place in which to live and worship the Lord their God.

Nehemiah received permission to go and rebuild the walls, and that was a hard task made more difficult by neighboring enemies who sabotaged the work. But finally, about 140 years after the walls had been destroyed, they were rebuilt and the people could live safely.

Nehemiah's name means "the LORD comforts." God comforted his people through the

strong leadership and vision of Nehemiah.

As we await Jesus' coming, we know that he comes to bring us the Lord's comfort, the comfort of being safe from our enemies. God asks us to be builders too—of a kingdom in which justice and truth embrace and people live in peace, where Jesus is King and we live in loving obedience to him.

In what ways are you helping to bring the Lord's comfort to others, following Jesus' example?

Lord of comfort, we long for your coming again, when all will be restored and the world will know your peace. When you arrive, may you find us faithfully working to build your kingdom, we pray. Amen.

FIRSTBORN SON

She gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger. . . .
—Luke 2:7

It's so wonderful to hold a newborn baby in your arms. To look into the newly opened eyes, to feel the delicate skin, to hear the little squeaks. We pause here in wonder at Mary's firstborn son, lying in a manger.

But as we admire the baby in the manger, we know that he has to grow up. It's not a baby who "will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). It's not a baby who will take on the religious establishment and the Roman caesar and Satan and sin and death. It's not a baby who will die for our sake on a cross. It's not a baby who will then rise from the tomb, ascend to heaven, and take his seat at the Father's right hand to reign.

That sweet little newborn will grow up and overturn the power structures of the world.

Though he is almighty God, he becomes a helpless infant. Instead of royal robes he wears strips of cloth. Instead of a warrior surrounded by an army, he is attended by nobodies. The thunder of his authority is muted into the cries of a child.

But this helpless baby is a powerful threat because he is a promise that the days of the powerful are numbered.

Let's marvel that in this little bundle lies the power that will change our lives—and this world—forever.

"O come, let us adore him, Christ, the Lord!"

All glory to you, great God and Lord, for the gift of your firstborn Son, Jesus Christ, whom you sent to save us. Amen and Amen!

TERRIFIED SHEPHERDS

The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people." —Luke 2:10

For the shepherds watching over their sheep, it started off as a quiet night. Then suddenly an angel was standing in front of them! Of course they were terrified, but the angel said, "Do not be afraid." Then the angel announced that he was bringing good news that would give all the people great joy.

This was not just good news; it was *life-changing* good news. The Savior had been born, and he was going to deliver us out of all the trouble we were in. And how could the shepherds know who he was? The angel said, "You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Next, without any notice, an entire army of angels appeared, not coming to terrify the world but to surround them with praise about God's plan for a peace-filled world.

That's the promise of Christmas: God's peace, God's invitation to the world to start over again.

The invitation still stands: Come to Bethlehem. Come and be a part of something new: a new king, a new kingdom, a new way of life.

And how do we become part of this new kingdom? By faith. By believing this story about this good news. For when we believe this story, we start over. In the words of Jesus, "You must be born again" (John 3:7). Come, Jesus says; you can have new life and become the children of God (John 1:12)!

Lord Jesus, show us the way to your manger so that in seeing you, we may believe—and in believing have eternal life. Amen.

PONDERING MARY

Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.
—Luke 2:19

What did Mary ponder? Did she pinch herself, trying to grasp the truth that lying in front of her in a manger was the Son of God himself, the promised Messiah?

Did she wonder how God could also be a real human baby boy? A baby that needed cuddling and attentive care?

Mary surely realized that she was in the presence of a miracle. Thinking about what the shepherds had said, she probably thought back to the day nine months earlier when she too was visited by an angel. On that day she learned that she, a virgin, would become pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit, and that the child in her womb would be the very Son of God.

Almighty God, who is beyond space and time, chose to empty himself and to take on human flesh. Out of his great

love for you and me, he came as a baby born to this mother that night in Bethlehem. There in the manger lay our Savior, who would surrender his own life for your sake and mine. The one whom Mary held and nursed, who could not even hold up his head and would need his diaper changed, was God in the flesh come to make us whole.

One day this very real human being would choose to give his very real body over to be crucified. And Mary would be there to ponder that too.

Will you ponder these things with Mary?

Child of Bethlehem, we are in awe at the miracle of your birth. Thank you for living among us, as one of us. Amen.

JOSEPH, SON OF DAVID

"Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

—Matthew 1:20

Like Mary, Joseph had a visit from an angel. Like Mary, Joseph obeyed the angel's message. And, like Mary, his life was turned upside down.

Joseph's life was that of a village craftsman. Income wasn't always certain; business could be precarious. Joseph didn't need adventures and long-distance trips; he needed a good steady stream of work.

But as Joseph followed God's direction, the adventures began. First he had to endure disapproving looks and remarks from neighbors and family members over the scandal of Mary's pregnancy. Then there was the trip to Bethlehem, never easy but certainly made more difficult as Mary was about to give birth. And because they had no place to stay, she gave birth to baby Jesus in a stable. Then shepherds came telling about a visit

by angels, and, later, astrologers from foreign lands came to honor Jesus as a new king. Then Joseph had to run with Mary and Jesus to Egypt to escape King Herod's slaughter of baby boys (Matthew 2).

This wasn't what Joseph had figured on when he had pledged himself to Mary. But when Jesus enters our life, we can expect things to be different. Our lives can be turned upside down as he takes us on adventures—especially on the biggest adventure of all: life with him in the kingdom of God.

Lord and Savior, we know that your promises are true. Guide us to serve and honor you, wherever you call us to go. Amen.

PATIENT ANNA AND SIMEON

It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. —Luke 2:26

An old man stands in the temple with a baby in his arms. Chuckling with giddy joy, or lost in wonder? Then he announces that he has seen God's salvation and he can die in peace.

But what has Simeon seen, really? It's just a little child in his arms, a speechless newcomer to the world. Whatever salvation this baby might work is still only a promise and a hope. But Simeon stands there in grateful anticipation at the future he holds in his hands.

Then there is the prophet Anna, also old and approaching the end of her days. She adds to the joy and praise of the moment.

By the time Jesus becomes a grown man, Simeon and Anna will have died. They will not be able to see with their own eyes what Jesus does as the Savior of the world. But in their patient

faith they saw enough to know that God is true to his promises.

Today we know more than they did, for we have the rest of the gospel story. And we hope for more. Having tasted the kingdom's presence, we hunger and thirst for its coming completely when Jesus comes again.

But for now, may we stand here in patient faith, like Anna and Simeon, and say, "We have seen him, and that's enough for now. We know and trust that the Lord will keep his promises."

Holy God, fill our hearts with wonder, strength, and patience at the revelation of your glory that we have seen in Christ, our Lord. Amen.

JOYFUL WISE MEN

When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. . . . They bowed down and worshiped him.
—Matthew 2:10-11

Stars? Magi? Lavishly expensive gifts? What does this strange story mean?

The Magi are the first of a long line of people from other nations and cultures who will come to honor Jesus and worship him. They are Gentiles, people from outside the Israelite nation. Many of these Gentiles are worshipers of other gods, but when they meet Jesus, they will come to know him for who he really is. They will believe in his power to save and give new life, and, like the Magi, they will react to his presence with joy, honor, and worship.

The story of the star of Bethlehem tells us that God's love is for all people of all races from all nations and all times. None of us has a corner on God's love or can keep God's light for ourselves. Jesus came to be the Savior of the world—all of it.

The passion of the Magi to find Jesus should make us ponder our own passion for Jesus. Is it truly our hearts' desire to know him? Would we leave everything behind to meet him and follow him? Are we willing to abandon our whole being to the joy of discovering Jesus as our Savior?

When the Magi found Jesus, they presented him gifts that were symbols of their hearts. Are we willing to offer him the same?

O God, shine the light of your love in the darkness. Shine it around and above us, leading us all to Jesus, the light of the world. Fill our hearts with your light, and may we offer them to you. In Jesus, Amen.

PIONEER JESUS

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

—Hebrews 12:1-2

Hebrews 11 provides an interesting list of faith-heavyweights in biblical history. These are people who were able to see living possibilities where others only saw dead ends, who saw victory where others saw defeat, who saw what God could do when others saw the impossible. They not only saw with eyes of faith, but they also acted on that faith.

Each person mentioned here understood faith as a verb, as a spiritual muscle that allowed them to act. Faith helped them persevere even in the midst of difficult circumstances—like Joseph in Egypt. They were able to step out into the unknown with courage and to take risks—like Rahab and Gideon.

It shouldn't surprise us where this list ends: with "Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith." Jesus, Prince of peace. Jesus,

Immanuel ("God with us"). Jesus, King of kings and Lord of lords!

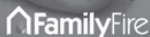
As we look forward to a new year and the journey of life ahead of us, we can look back at people who have lived by faith, spiritual ancestors in Jesus' extended family and many others who have been welcomed into the family of God. We can be encouraged by their stories. Even more, we can look forward to the One who looks encouragingly back at us, the One who came to die so that we could live with him forever.

Lord Jesus, give us the courage and strength to be the people of faith you call us to be. Amen.



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