

Sept/Oct 2017

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew

## THE REFORMATION FOR TODAY

ALSO: GRATITUDE'S SONG

Friends:

Five hundred years ago the Protestant Reformation set changes in motion that still reverberate around the world today. At the heart of this reform movement was a passion to understand God's Word to us as his people. *What did God promise in the Bible, and what made it good news? How exactly can a person be "saved"—and, more personally, how can I, a sinner, become right with God?* Questions like these have burned in every sin-torn heart throughout human history.



In October, Pastor Kurt Selles studies with us the core teachings of Scripture that energized the Reformation. Just as salvation is at the core of the good news of Jesus, these key principles give shape to the truth of how sinners like us can be restored to God and glorify him forever.

But first, in September, Pastor Ruth Boven explores what the Bible teaches on living grateful lives. In response to the God who is our Creator, Sustainer, and Savior, gratitude shapes every corner of our lives and prompts us to praise and honor the Lord in all we do.

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

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Steven Koster". The script is fluid and cursive.

—Steven Koster

# Today

Sept/Oct 2017

**refresh, refocus, renew**



**"Gratitude's Song"**  
**Ruth Boven**



**"The Reformation  
for Today"**  
**Kurt Selles**

**Managing Editor:** Eleanor Lamsma  
**Executive Editor:** Steven Koster

TODAY (USPS 185-140),  
Volume 67, Number 5,  
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.

Copyright © 2017, Back to  
God Ministries International.  
Printed in U.S.A.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture  
quotations in this publication  
are from The Holy Bible, New  
International Version®, NIV®.  
Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984,  
2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by  
permission. All rights reserved  
worldwide.

Cover photo Lightstock.



**ReFrame**  
Media

# september

## Gratitude's Song

**Ruth Boven**

The Bible urges followers of Jesus to live grateful lives. In Colossians 3 the apostle Paul describes this as singing a song of gratitude, for gratitude is the most fitting response to all that God has done for us in Christ. Practicing gratitude shapes our lives in ways that help others to hear the melody of God's goodness and saving grace. This month we'll explore gratitude's song from Genesis to Revelation. Sometimes gratitude sounds like thanks; other times, praise. But all the while biblical gratitude is rightly aimed at the loving God who is full of grace and truth. May these devotional readings help us all grow in singing gratitude's song a little more clearly.

*Rev. Ruth Boven has served since 2014 as minister of congregational care at LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and before that she served as a pastor in another church for nearly ten years. Ruth is married to Greg and has two adult children.*

## GRATITUDE'S BEGINNINGS

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

—1 Chronicles 16:34

This month we set our hearts on gratitude. Gratitude is good for us. Even science has proven it. The physician and researcher Hans Seyle, who extensively studied the negative effects of stress on humans, concluded that the best antidote to stress is gratitude. Of course, there's much more to it than what science can name, because gratitude is rooted in God. Out of the groundswell of God's goodness gratitude grows.

In ancient Israel, King David's whole being responded to God's goodness. In this song of praise we see that David's gratitude springs from God's creational activity. Our first evidences of God's goodness are in creation. David calls for the heavens to rejoice and the earth to be glad. He invites the sea to resound, the fields to be jubilant, and the trees of the forest to sing for joy.

Why? Because the world is firmly established. In the beginning God acted with goodness in establishing this world, and God continues to sustain it by his costly grace. It's been said that if the essence of God is goodness and grace, the essence of God's people is gratitude.

When we take time to recall God's goodness and grace, our hearts tune in to the grateful melody all creation sings. So let's join the sea and fields and trees today and sing for joy!

Creator God, we lift our hearts to you in gratitude for this beautiful world you have made. Thank you for all you have done for us. We give thanks in the name of Jesus, through whom we have received grace upon grace. Amen.

## LIFE IS GIFT

*The LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.*  
—Genesis 2:7

Life is a gift. We know that. But sometimes we forget. We give in to cultural pressures prompting us to believe we are self-made. We think, “I am who and where I am because I’ve worked hard to get here.”

Genesis 2 tells a different story. It says that we are dust and that God’s breath animated that dust into life. We are who we are first of all because of the life-breath of God. Our very breath depends on him. Moment to moment we rely on the gracious gift of breath that makes human life possible. God is the constant source of our being, not us. At the same time, God sees our vulnerabilities and the challenges of being human. Psalm 103 tells us that God remembers we are dust. God calls us to remember too. When we do, gratitude happens. “Praise the LORD, my soul;

all my inmost being, praise his holy name” (Psalm 103:1).

Amazingly, God not only sees our vulnerabilities; he also has experienced them in the flesh. When Jesus, who is fully God, lived on this earth, he fully took on the limitations and vulnerabilities of being human. What gives us hope is that Jesus, clothed with our own flesh, died, rose to new life, and is now ruling with God in heaven. The dust from which we were made has entered the heavenly throne room on our behalf. “Praise the LORD, my soul”!

With gratitude in our hearts we thank you, living God, for your breath of life. Make us ever grateful. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

## COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

*He remembered us in our low estate . . . His love endures forever.*

—Psalm 136:23

“Count your blessings, name them one by one. . . .” These words are part of an old hymn Christians have sung for more than 100 years, and the message is still important today. Central to the pilgrim journey we travel is taking stock of the gifts God has given us.

Psalm 136 has reminded people of this fact for well over 2,000 years, and it urges us to remember God’s goodness in community. In this psalm we can see a clear call-and-response format. As God’s people sang this psalm together, a worship leader would sing the first phrase, and the people would respond with the refrain “*His love endures forever.*” Again and again they would recount what God had done for them—from freeing them, to feeding them, to remembering them. And as they counted their

blessings, they would say, “His love endures forever.”

Sometimes while worshipping with God’s people, I notice echoes of this psalm’s graceful rhythms. The wonders of God’s grace and forgiveness are declared, and the people sing a hymn of thanksgiving. The good news that Jesus saves and that God’s Spirit is at work among us is preached, and the people commit themselves to grateful service. At the end of the worship time, God’s promise of blessing is spoken over his people, and they receive it joyfully with an “Amen.”

With whom will you join to count your blessings today?

Lord, your works are wonderful. You have remembered us. Your love endures forever. Thank you. In Jesus, Amen.

**CALLING ALL THE EARTH**

*Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth.*

—Psalm 100:1

“Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all ye lands.” That’s the way I memorized Psalm 100:1 as a child (King James Version). My young imagination pictured grand, far-off kingdoms set in golden, rolling landscapes, all lifting their attention to the heavens to join in one huge happy shout of praise.

I picture it a bit differently now—maybe because I know more about the world than I did then. I’m more aware that not all in our world is grand and golden. In fact, we live in a world filled with wars, divisions, and inequities of all sorts. Sometimes we’re tempted to believe that nothing could ever unite us.

But the psalmist believes unity is possible. God loves every person in every land, and God’s desire for each one is to come to him with thanksgiving and praise.

The invitation, the welcome, the call to know God’s goodness goes out into all the world. The psalmist calls every person in every time and place to offer thanksgiving, singing, and grateful devotion to the God who made us and is faithful to all creation. This verse pushes us beyond all boundaries to embrace all peoples, and beyond every self-centered preoccupation to worship only God.

So give thanks to God today. “For the Lord is good.” His love extends to the ends of the earth and endures forever.

Gracious God, your goodness fills the earth. With gratitude we hear your call to come before you joyfully and to pray that all people will be able to shout along. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.



## PASTURE LIVING

*He is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.*  
—Psalm 95:7

If you are a parent, maybe you have experienced what seems like ingratitude on the part of your children. When so much of our lives centers on their physical, educational, spiritual, financial, and transportation needs, and they often seem to take it for granted, we can become discouraged.

But today I received an email from my son that made my heart glad. It showed that he is aware of some of what my husband and I have done for him. And he was grateful!

Psalm 95 reminds us that “we are the people of [God’s] pasture, the flock under his care.” Are we aware of the benefits of pasture living?

In the parable of the lost son, when the younger son returns home and his older brother resents the celebration that fol-

lows, the father says to the elder son, “Everything I have is yours” (Luke 15:31).

To be a people under God’s care means that abundant goodness is always available to us. In God’s pasture, there is no scarcity of goodness. God’s gifts of his Spirit to us and of faith, hope, and love do not diminish when they’re given to others as well. These things simply multiply; there’s always more than enough!

Today we’re called to explore how we can live in gratitude for the rich, green pasture of God’s care as we extend God’s goodness to others.

Aware of the abundant goodness you provide for us, loving God, prompt us to respond in gratitude and generous living. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

## GRASS AND GRATITUDE

*The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone. —Psalm 103:15-16*

I've read an account by a Christian brother who, while hospitalized in critical condition, had an overwhelming experience of gratitude. He describes lying quietly in a melancholy hush that had settled over the intensive care unit at two o'clock in the morning. There was no warning, no preparation.

Then, alone in the dark that morning, his spirit was suddenly possessed by something he concludes was gratitude. He said it came on like a seizure, a fit of frenzy, of pure unadulterated joy.

In that moment he realized how fragile and fleeting life is but also how precious and miraculous it is. He said he'd been so busy in his life that he'd almost forgotten the gift of life he'd been given. In his whirlwind of gratitude, all he could say were the words of Psalm

103: "Praise the LORD, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name."

With words both simple and haunting, the psalmist reminds us: "The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone." Though these words may give us pause, they do not lead us to despair. For we can also be sure that "from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him."

God's love is with us and will not let anything separate us from him (see Romans 8:38-39). Praise the Lord!

Lord, today we are reminded how fleeting and precious life is. Receive our thanks for this incomparably good gift. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## THANKS IN TIMES OF TROUBLE

*The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.*  
—Psalm 9:9

Psalm 9 begins with thanks for all of God's wonderful deeds, including being a refuge for the oppressed.

Where does your mind go when you think of oppression? Mine goes to the prison in South Africa where Nelson Mandela spent years behind bars because he wanted justice for oppressed people. I visited that prison and saw Mandela's cell. It's hard to fathom a person emerging from that place with the hope and fortitude to keep fighting for justice. But what Mandela professed is that he was not alone during his imprisonment. There was a stronghold he could rely on in his time of trouble. His stronghold was the God of justice, who "rules the world in righteousness and judges the peoples with equity." When Mandela was finally freed, he praised the

God who does not abandon us in times of trouble.

"Those who know your name trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you." They "sing the praises of the Lord" and "proclaim among the nations what he has done." God wants to lift up all who are burdened by oppression. The prophet Isaiah declared about the coming Christ: "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice" (Isaiah 42:3).

May you know that the God of justice who has come to us in Christ is your refuge today.

Lord God of justice, receive our thanks for being our stronghold in times of trouble. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## REAL THANKS

*Let them sacrifice thank offerings and tell of his works with songs of joy.*  
—Psalm 107:22

The psalms are real about life. They don't ignore or downplay life's struggles and fears. That's one reason why they are such a treasure for many people.

Psalm 107 address several difficulties faced by mortals in this world: being lost, imprisoned, afflicted with disease, and tossed about by a storm. Today the experience of being lost may include trying to find our way amid the myriad choices and complexities of our world. Being imprisoned for rebelling against God may include our addictions to various sins, comforts, conveniences, and social media. Our illnesses, storms, and other troubles may have different names and contexts today, but if they result from ignoring or defying God, the need for God's forgiveness and help still resonates in our hearts and souls. We cry out in our need, and God guides, frees,

heals, calms the storm, and in a multitude of other ways blesses his people. Trouble does not have the final word.

So we give thanks to God for all he has done, and we name and bear witness to the ways we've been rescued from trouble. Looking ahead toward worship in the next couple of days, we know that throughout the world, God's people will gather and give thanks together.

May you have the opportunity to do that as well, in body or in spirit, and to share with others each day about God's wonderful works!

Gracious God, we thank you for rescuing us in times of trouble. Enable us to tell of your works with grateful hearts. In Christ we pray. Amen.

**THANKS FOR SMALL THINGS**

*He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. . . . Sing to the LORD with grateful praise. . . .*  
—Psalm 147:3, 7

When our young children scraped a knee or elbow, they'd cry for a bandage—whether they needed one or not. I'd usually comply. It was surprising how much comfort could come from a small adhesive strip. That's probably because the tiny bandage represented much more than a wound covering, for it was put in place by hands with a history of showing love and tender kindness.

Throughout the Bible we can see that God also uses small things to bring hope and healing to the world. God chose the small nation of Israel and charged them to be a blessing to all other nations. Through this group of people, preserved and cared for by God's faithful hands, the Savior, Jesus Christ, came into the world. And the Savior himself came in a tiny package: a baby born of a teen-

age peasant girl. Who would imagine that such a child would heal the brokenhearted and bind up their wounds?

Psalm 147 uses words that echo throughout the Bible and were made visible as Jesus went about his compassionate healing ministry. What's more, Jesus promises to forgive all our sins and to be with us always to bring comfort and hope far beyond words printed on a page.

Let's give thanks that God works in small ways. Ask him to help you see today how his faithful hands are tending your wounded heart.

God, receive our thanks that Jesus came in a small way to change everything with the forgiveness and hope he brings. In his name we pray. Amen.

**GOOD NEWS**

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

—Psalm 150:6

There is no doubt about it: Psalm 150 pours out praise from a grateful heart. The psalmist joyously declares whom, where, why, and even how we should praise—with every noise-making instrument available. This final psalm in the prayer book of God's people ends on a note of jubilant praise.

This is good news. It's good news because, as we have already noted, the psalms reflect the breadth of human experience. The psalms address life's unfairness. They express anger and despair, lament and sadness. They speak of God's laws and righteousness and of our own struggle to walk in God's ways. I can't count the number of times I've read or spoken words from the psalms at a hospital bedside, to a grieving spouse or family, or to someone in jail or prison. As we go

about life, the questions asked in the psalms are ours too. "How long, LORD?" . . . "Who is like you, LORD?" . . . "Why must I go about mourning?" . . . "Where can I go from your Spirit?" (Psalm 13:1; 35:10; 43:2; 139:7).

It's good news that we can bring all our struggles and our joys and our wonderings to the Lord. The psalms end in praise because that's the trajectory of our lives and all human history. The suffering and evil in our world do not get the final word. God's deliverance does. The end is good beyond our imagining. So "let everything that has breath praise the LORD."

With hearts filled with gratitude for your deliverance, we praise you, Lord. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## AVAILABLE RESOURCES

*Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.*  
—John 6:11

In the Bible, thanksgiving often occurs in a prayer over a meal. But this was no ordinary meal! Jesus and his disciples were out in the middle of nowhere with thousands of hungry mouths to feed. The need in front of them loomed so much larger than their available resources. They found that a boy had “five small barley loaves and two small fish.” But surely that was not sufficient for 5,000 men, plus women and children!

How often in your life do the needs in front of you loom so much larger than your available resources? Maybe the stack of bills you owe stands taller than your checkbook balance. Perhaps keeping both family and job going requires more wisdom and stamina than you possess. Reality is tough.

But Jesus entered our reality. And part of Jesus’ response to

a tough situation is to stop and give thanks. Jesus lifts his attention to what God has already provided, even if that may seem insignificant.

When we stop and give thanks for what God has given, we’re reminded that God is for us, not against us. When Jesus gives thanks and then goes on to feed many thousands of people, we see that God cares about our needs. Reality’s tough, but gratitude opens our eyes to Jesus’ extravagant love. Are you grateful for his blessings today?

When our resources don’t meet our needs, Lord, help us to keep giving thanks and to trust in your unfailing love. In your name we pray. Amen.

## WHAT'S UNDER YOUR RUG?

*"I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little."*

—Luke 7:47

Years ago there was a popular song with a catchy tune called "Don't Worry, Be Happy." Its bright melody and simple message could almost convince you that brushing all your worries under a rug and forcing a smile could fill you with happiness.

But true happiness doesn't work like that. Instead, it's bundled up with gratitude.

Gratitude is always a response. Gratitude depends not on ignoring what's going on in our lives, but in choosing to see and accept the deepest reality about our existence. Jesus' encounter with the woman "who lived a sinful life" demonstrates this beautifully. You see, the Pharisee had swept all of his sins under the rug of self-righteousness and self-sufficiency. He chose to ignore the truth of his brokenness and his deep need for forgiveness. His ingratitude pro-

duced a toxic bitterness that caused him to completely miss the fact that the Savior of the world and of his soul was standing right in front of him.

The woman didn't miss that. There could be no sweeping of sins under the rug for her. Everyone seemed to know about them anyway. So, acknowledging her brokenness and receiving the forgiveness Jesus offers, her heart and her hands poured out her gratitude.

What's under your rug? What's under mine? Let's bring it out, acknowledge it, and accept the forgiveness that Jesus offers.

Lord, may we overflow with gratitude for your forgiveness of all our sins. In your name, Amen.



## FLEXING YOUR GRATITUDE MUSCLES

*He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.*  
—Luke 17:16

I'm a bit of a health nut. I exercise regularly. As I age, I'm noticing how quickly my muscles weaken when I don't use them for a while. It's often said that if you don't use them, you lose them. It's helpful to think of gratitude in that way too.

Gratitude is not an inborn trait that some have and others don't. Rather, it's more like a muscle that can be strengthened over time. And being intentional about exercising it can be critical to becoming a more grateful person.

We don't know much about the ten lepers that Jesus healed. We know that the one who returned and gave thanks was a Samaritan. Luke may have included that detail because the Samaritans were looked down on by the Jews of Jesus' day. But this Samaritan demonstrated a

level of gratitude that the other lepers didn't show.

At a time when things like entitlement, accusation, venting anger, and violence seem to have taken hold of our culture, what kind of impact might gratitude have? Saying "I'm grateful" or "Thank you" does not simply express our thanksgiving but actually gives voice to a countercultural witness that has the power to push back the tide of resentment among us. Then there is room for a fresh appreciation of God's renewing, saving grace.

Are you keeping your gratitude muscles in shape?

Gracious God, receive our thanks for your healing touch and power in our lives. In the name of Jesus, help us remember all that you do for us each day. Amen.

## WHEN HE HAD GIVEN THANKS

*While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."*  
—Matthew 26:26

I've often wondered what Jesus was giving thanks for at this moment. He knew he would soon be betrayed by Judas. He had told his disciples that he would soon be crucified. In the coming day he would also be abandoned by his followers, denied by Peter, sentenced by the religious leaders, beaten and mocked by Roman soldiers, and hung on a cross to die.

But in this moment Jesus gave thanks. Maybe he did it as an example, reminding his disciples and us of the importance of regularly giving thanks to God for our daily bread.

But maybe Jesus was giving thanks for more. Perhaps he was giving thanks for his followers, gathered there in that upper room, who would soon take on the work of his earthly ministry, powered by the Holy Spirit. They would soon begin

proclaiming the news of his death and resurrection around the world. Jesus may also have been giving thanks that God's plan to restore the people and world he loves so much was unfolding even as they prayed and ate.

I'm humbled by this. I'm also compelled by it. If Jesus lifted his heart in gratitude to God even as he stood under the shadow of the cross, how much more, as recipients of his forgiveness and grace, should we offer our gratitude and thanksgiving to God—daily!

Thank you, Jesus, for the sacrifice of yourself and for the forgiveness of all our sins. Guide us to share our gratitude with others today. Amen.

## REASON FOR KINGDOM JOY

*Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children."*

—Luke 10:21

Jesus sent out 72 followers to heal the sick and spread the good news that "the kingdom of God has come near." He warned them that while some people and towns would welcome them with joy, not everyone would understand or receive the good news they brought.

The upside-down nature of God's kingdom can be hard for people to accept, especially when society values the strong, powerful, and independent over the weak, helpless, and dependent of our world.

When the 72 followers returned, they were pleased and excited that they had been given power to do Jesus' work. They said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name!" Luke reports that Jesus was also filled with joy.

He praised God for the way the kingdom is more readily received by little children than the wise and learned.

If you think you should be further along in strength or maturity of faith, take comfort. Jesus treasures all who receive him in humble, trusting faith, like children. If you worry that you don't know enough or haven't had enough experience, take comfort. Jesus gives wisdom to his children who don't have it all figured out. The message Jesus declares is that no matter who you are, "the kingdom of God has come near to you."

Thank you, Father, that your kingdom of peace and grace has come near to even me. Amen.

## GRATITUDE AT THE GRAVESIDE

*Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me."*  
—John 11:41

One of the most striking things about Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead is the intimacy of this story. Jesus' human connection of friendship, caring, and grief with Mary and Martha over Lazarus's death shows that Jesus is like us. Jesus built friendships. He expressed feelings and emotions. He experienced sorrow and empathy. Further, I believe that when Jesus cried out for Lazarus to come from the tomb, that cry rose from a grief not only for his friend but also for all humanity stuck in death's grip. As he stood before that tomb of death, Jesus' heart broke for you and me too.

But death and grief don't win the day here. They don't have the last word. God is the one whose breath animates every living thing. And Jesus the Son is so intimately connected to the Father that there's no doubt

about the Father hearing his prayers. Jesus prays aloud for the benefit of those around him: "Father, I thank you that you have heard me."

Then Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. With the power of God, Jesus looks death square in the face without fear, though he knows how frightened we are by it. Jesus can stand at the graveside with gratitude because he knows God's plan to bring us life through his own death. And today he wants you and me to know it too. Believe the good news.

Help us, living God, to find comfort and joy in the good news that you have shattered death's grip on us through your Son, Jesus. We pray in his name. Amen.

## THANKS FOR GOD'S WORK

*I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world.* —Romans 1:8

Paul begins most of his letters with expressions of thanks to God for the church and the believers to whom he writes. The thanksgiving often leads into a prayer, and that pattern makes sense.

While I visited with a member of my congregation who was recovering from surgery, she talked about the progress she was making and the excellent care she was receiving from the physical therapists. She shared that the care went well beyond her physical needs. Because her husband lived in a dementia care unit nearby, the therapists thoughtfully included walks to her husband's room as part of the rehabilitation plan for her. She was delighted and thankful. Together we gave thanks to God in prayer for that thoughtful gift.

Have people shown thoughtfulness in your life? Have you looked around you and seen evidences of God's care through family members, friends, acquaintances—and even strangers? It's easy to miss seeing God's hand at work through others and God's goodness woven into the tapestry of our days.

But maybe today, as Paul did, we could listen carefully for reports of people living out their faith, and we could look for signs of God's goodness in our own lives. Then let's also pray and give thanks.

Loving God, you are at work in our world. We hear faith-filled reports and see signs of your goodness, and we are thankful. Hear our prayer of gratitude, in Jesus' name. Amen.

## THANKS FOR OTHERS ON THE JOURNEY

*I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus.*  
—1 Corinthians 1:4

We don't know a lot about the people to whom Paul was writing in the ancient city of Corinth. But we do know that the people struggled sometimes with getting along.

That shouldn't surprise us. If you belong to some kind of community of faith, whether it's a family, small group, house church, or large congregation, you know there is sometimes discord and disagreement. That happens in all kinds of groups and gatherings.

Paul's greeting to the church in Corinth gives a helpful perspective. First, Paul affirms that living out our faith in community with one another is God's intent for us. The Bible from beginning to end makes clear that God blesses and lives among the family or community of faith that he is gathering together.

Second, Paul identifies the glue that gathers God's people together and keeps them united to one another. That glue is God's grace. God's grace not only covers all our sins and unites us to Christ as individuals; it also helps us see others as people for whom Christ was willing to die. When we see others through God's grace-filled eyes, our bonds with one another are strengthened. This requires the hard work of dying to our own preferences and egos and giving thanks to God for his grace that brings us all together. Let's ask for God's help with that today!

Gracious God, thank you for placing us among others who seek to follow Jesus. Help us to be faithful together. In Christ's name, Amen.

## GRATEFUL SHINING

*Always [give] thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*  
—Ephesians 5:20

In today's Scripture verses, Paul urges his readers to live as light in a world of darkness. Believers in Christ can do that by living wisely, trusting that wise, godly behavior will serve as a witness to the living Christ.

Sometimes we mistakenly think that witnessing to our faith means only knocking on doors or traveling to faraway lands to talk about the love of Jesus. In reality, shining the light of Christ's love can happen in our everyday lives all of the time. It happens when we recognize we are new creations in Christ. Centered in gratitude for what Christ has done for us, we are empowered to love and respect the great variety of people God brings into contact with us.

I remember an incident that happened over 30 years ago in the breakroom at my workplace. Several people had

started a conversation about a person who wasn't there. The assumptions and comments about this person were not kind. One of my colleagues stood up and said, "It's not right to be talking about our co-worker in this way without her being present to defend herself." As you can imagine, the room fell silent.

The light of Christ shone into the darkness of that moment as we were reminded how to love and respect our "neighbor." May we too make the most of every opportunity today to gratefully shine the light of Christ.

Light of the world, may our gratitude for all that you have done for us empower us to shine your light today. In your name we pray. Amen.

## GRATITUDE IN COMMUNITY

*Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

—1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

One of the most gratifying experiences in life, I believe, is to see Christ's followers living as Christ's followers. I often get glimpses of that when I visit a person who is sick and I see the many cards they have received, hear about a meal someone brought the night before, or learn that another church member will be bringing them to an appointment the next day. I get other glimpses when I see Christ's followers teaching Sunday school, sharing their resources with people in need, leading Bible studies in prisons, serving meals to people who are homeless, or working toward justice and peace in our world. I could go on.

As Paul describes the way we should live and serve and be the church together, I feel both challenged and thankful. I'm challenged in realizing that

living for Jesus is hard work. Perhaps the hardest instruction is to live peacefully together and to always strive to do good to others, even those with whom we deeply disagree.

It must be why Paul also calls us to constantly remember our rootedness in Christ. To rejoice and pray and be thankful continually isn't about skipping through life with our head in the clouds. It's about remembering, in all we do, the sacrificial love and grace we've been shown in Christ. Carrying gratitude around with us daily helps to shape our witness of Christ's saving love to the world.

Make us channels of your peace, love, and grace today, Jesus. We pray with thanks. Amen.



## HOPEFUL THANKS

*You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.*  
—Romans 5:6

It's been said that our souls need hope the way our lungs need oxygen. Paul knew about our need for hope. It's good to keep in mind that Paul was writing to Christians living under the dark, oppressive grip of Roman power. Seeds of hope were hard to scrounge up in the midst of the thorns of uncertainty and turmoil.

My guess is that you—like me—are often surrounded by situations of uncertainty and turmoil. Maybe a loved one has received a troubling diagnosis and the path ahead is frightening. Maybe you have a strained relationship with a child or friend and you're uncertain if or when it might be restored. Or maybe you are uncertain whether God, who knows your past and heart completely, will accept and love you.

Paul extends hope to each one of us—a hope so powerful that it can both calm our fears and move us to give thanks. That hope is built on the truth that even though we are powerless and sinful, Christ died for us. And there's more: Christ rose again from the dead. So our hope is forged out of death's destruction, out of Christ's victory over the grave. There's no greater hope in this world.

The darkness and uncertainties in the world around us do not get the final word. God does. And God reaches out with life-renewing love to us. So let's live this day with hope, giving thanks for Christ, our Savior!

O God, your love is beyond imagining. Fill us with hope today. We pray and rejoice in the name of our risen Savior. Amen!

## SACRIFICIAL THANKS

*I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.*  
—Romans 12:1

Statistics show that in North America church attendance is shrinking, especially among young people. It's hard to know what to make of this trend, but some churches have tried to respond by adding a "cool" factor to their worship—cool music, cool pastor, cool worship space, cool coffee bar.

Further studies have shown, though, that "cool" is not what young people are actually looking for in a church. Instead, they are seeking authenticity in their leaders and a cause worth staking their lives on.

Paul proclaims that there is something worth sacrificing everything for: it's called God's mercy. And yet God's mercy cannot be bought through any sacrifice we make. It's God's gift to us, offered freely in Christ. And Paul explains that when we look and see God's mercy

in our lives, our response will be gratitude.

The authors of the Heidelberg Catechism wrote, "Christ, having redeemed us by his blood, is also restoring us by his Spirit into his image, so that with our whole lives we may show that we are thankful to God for his benefits" (Q&A 86).

Living gratefully isn't your work alone. Christ is at work in you, opening your eyes to God's mercy and prompting you to stake your life on a cause with eternal benefits. How will you be a living sacrifice today?

Lord, help me to be ever grateful for your mercy and to offer my life as a sacrifice to you. Amen.

## GRATITUDE'S SONG

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

Music and song often express the emotions of our hearts. As our Scripture for today suggests, this is an important part of being God's people. The writer of Psalm 22 adds that God is "enthroned on" or "dwells among" the praises of his people (v. 3). God has come near to us, and it's important for us to draw near to him with songs from our hearts.

But what kind of song pleases God? Ancient? Contemporary? With instruments? Without? Actually, these distinctions are not important.

Paul provides three guidelines for our thinking. First, Paul is not talking about singing alone in the shower. He's referring to the singing and learning and growing that we do together as God's gathered, worshipping people. It's in our joining

together in song that God is praised and pleased.

Second, our singing needs to come from our hearts. Out of the heart, the mouth speaks and sings. God wants our expressions of praise to be true and authentic.

Third, our communal singing reveals our gratitude for all that God has done for us in Christ. Drawing attention to ourselves is not the goal. The goal is that God's goodness, grace, and powerful love will be lifted up by grateful hearts joined together in love.

Thank you, Lord, for saving our souls and for giving us songs to sing together. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

## JOYFUL INHERITANCE

*[Give] joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.*

—Colossians 1:12

Sometimes pastors are called into situations in church members' lives that they'd rather not know about. A pastor friend of mine dealt with a complicated inheritance dilemma in which family members were deeply divided and estranged from one another. It was sad to see that what was given in generosity was received with envy and ingratitude.

An inheritance is generally something unearned by the one who receives it. This is certainly the case with the inheritance we receive from God. It is God who qualifies us to receive our promised inheritance. It has nothing to do with our good behavior, or our right doctrine or exemplary prayers, or even our faith that could move a mountain.

What qualifies us for our inheritance in the kingdom of light

is our having been rescued in Christ by God's amazing grace. If it were up to us alone, we would continue down a path that takes us away from God. Paul reminds us that God, through Christ, forgives our sins and by his Spirit enables us to lead lives of gratitude. What's more, we are given "an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for [us]" (1 Peter 1:4). All of these benefits, given with generosity and grace, move God's children to give joyful thanks. May it be so for us today.

Generous God, you promise us an inheritance that will not spoil or fade. Help us to be ever grateful for the new life you give us in Christ. Amen.

## PRAYERFUL THANKS

*Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*  
—Philippians 4:6

Prayer is first about awe, realizing that the God who created and sustains the world also listens to us as we pray. Truly, the sovereign God hears our prayers and cares deeply about our lives.

Prayer orients us. When we bring God our thoughts, praise, petitions, laments, and gratitude—we are orienting ourselves to reality. In other words, we are acknowledging and naming the truth that God is Creator and we are his creatures. God reigns over all, and we are fully dependent on him. We are weak, but he is strong. God is the giver, and we are receivers.

A phone call in the middle of the night impressed this truth on me. My husband and I were in Mozambique. Back home, my sister had given birth to premature twins. The situation

was critical. Overwhelmed with feelings of helplessness that I had not known before, I saw how dependent we are on God. Though I could not physically help in this situation, I could pour out my heart to the listening, all-powerful God.

The Heidelberg Catechism tells us that prayer is necessary because it is the most important part of our thankfulness to God. Even in times of trouble, knowing that God cares and wants to carry our burdens of sorrow and pain gives us a reason to give thanks.

So give thanks today in prayer. God is listening, and he cares.

Listening God, thank you for listening to us in love. Inspire us to pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## OVERFLOWING THANKSGIVING

*All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.*  
—2 Corinthians 4:15

From the time we are little children, we are encouraged to be strong. Sometimes as adults we even ask little boys and girls to show us their muscles. Then we “ooh” and “ah” over how big and sturdy they are. Children themselves often like to show us how they can lift some “heavy” object too.

The truth of God’s good news, though, is that it’s OK to be weak. The Bible teaches that God’s strength is revealed in our lives through our weaknesses.

Paul describes us as fragile jars of clay that hold the treasure of God’s saving message in us. One way to think about this is to imagine that through the weakened cracks of our lives (our jars) the light in us shines out to others. Our places of weakness are where the strength of God can be seen more clearly. And knowing our own need for

God’s grace and power helps us to help others understand God’s good news.

What does overflowing thanks that gives glory to God look like? It looks like humility. It looks like demonstrating kindness, patience, and mercy toward our neighbors in their weakness and trusting God’s resurrecting power to make all things new.

May God be glorified by our overflowing thanksgiving today.

Lord God, we give you glory for your power that is made perfect in our weakness. May our gratitude today demonstrate your grace to others. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

## THANKS FOR GRACE

*Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.*  
—Romans 14:6

Whatever we do, says Paul, we do for the Lord. Paul is addressing differences in people who were part of the church in Rome. Some were meat eaters, and others believed it was more holy not to eat meat. The problem wasn't with what they were doing, because both groups were carrying out their faith practices with dedication and thanksgiving to God. The problem was in how they judged one another.

I remember noticing as a child how our neighbors who were Catholic went to church on Saturday evenings and mowed their grass on Sunday. My family mowed our grass on Saturday and went to church on Sunday. That memory came home to me recently as I visited with an 88-year-old Irish Catholic woman who had grown up near the church I

serve. We laughed as she told me that it took her a while to realize that it was possible to be a Christian even if you weren't an Irish Catholic. We shared about our faith stories, and we both spoke of our love for Jesus. We also both admitted that earlier in our lives we would have thought of each other as outside the loving embrace of God. How wrong we had been!

All that we have and are comes from God and belongs to God. Therefore we are blessed as God's people when all that we do is done in dedication and thanksgiving to God.

Gracious God, may all that I do and say today be filled with grace and give glory to you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## MINDFUL GRATITUDE

*Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.*  
—1 Corinthians 1:31

Gratitude requires mindfulness—living with eyes wide open. It calls for knowing that every good gift, everything beautiful and right and perfect and lovely, comes from God. And we must know where to direct our thanks. We know that at the center of the universe is the God who is strong and good. And we know what we're most thankful for—that when we were helpless and hopeless and dead in our sins, Christ gave us a new life, a clean slate, a holy purpose. We understand that although we deserve nothing, we have been given everything through God's grace. Going about our days with mindful gratitude makes a difference in us. And it makes a difference to those around us.

Paul wants us to be careful about the way we live out our faith. Our joy and thankfulness for God's gifts should be some-

thing that others find contagious, not condemning.

It's been said that our Christian witness in this world would be much stronger and more effective if we stopped shouting about the things we are *against* and started speaking more compellingly about the things we are *for*. That shouldn't be hard for us, for we believe that God is overwhelmingly *for* us and *for* this world.

How might we demonstrate that beautiful truth to our neighbors today?

God, you love this world so much that you gave your Son to save it. From the depths of our hearts we thank you. Help us to live with gratitude that moves our neighbors toward Jesus. Amen.



## THE LAMB ON THE THRONE

*"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!"*

—Revelation 5:13

We were made to praise God. As the Reformed tradition confesses, our chief purpose is "to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever" (Westminster Shorter Catechism). To glorify God means to enter into the joy of our salvation. It means that all that God has done for us in Christ directs our living and thanksgiving.

Revelation 5 shows that the grace poured out on us by the Lamb, who was slain, is at the center of our praise. An old hymn says it well: "Come, thou Fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy grace; streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise." Just as an instrument needs to be rightly tuned, so do our hearts.

It's so tempting to want praise directed at our own accomplishments. But the Bible is clear that we are unworthy of

the blessings we receive. We're called to declare the praise of the God who spoke us into being and rescued us from the power of sin and death by the self-sacrifice of the worthy Lamb, Jesus Christ, who had no sin.

All else that we do well in life—all we accomplish and all we contribute to God's kingdom of peace—flows from God's saving grace. So in gratitude we raise our thanks to the Lamb on the throne. His grace covers all our sins and shame, and his grace will lead us home. Is your heart tuned for gratitude today?

Gracious God, tune my heart to sing your grace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## ETERNAL GRATITUDE

*I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them."*

—Revelation 21:3

When I was child, heaven didn't sound like much fun. In church we sang about myriads of saints by the sea of crystal giving eternal praise to God (Revelation 4-5). I didn't dare declare my dread of something like a never-ending junior choir practice. One of the best parts of Sunday for me was to change out of the dress I had to wear and go outside to play.

I think about heaven differently now. The Bible teaches that heaven will come to earth. Revelation 21 pictures the New Jerusalem descending and proclaims the glorious truth that God will dwell forever here with us. There will be no more tears, crying, or pain. In that way, thank God, things will be very different for God's people.

But I believe there will also be some eternal continuity with our present world. The beauty

of the earth and all that is good and right and lovely about our earthly lives will remain. So the feel of damp grass underfoot as your poised bat waits to clobber a barreling baseball will still delight. The smell of lilacs will still intoxicate. The crimson cardinal will still thrill. The embrace of a loved one will still bring joy. All of this is true because God created this world in powerful love, and in that same powerful love God will renew it. Christ's death and resurrection demonstrate God's deep desire and aim to restore us and creation to fullness.

That's our future and our hope! That's our reason for gratitude—life forever with God!

Thank you, God, with all our hearts. Amen.

# october

## The Reformation for Today

**Kurt Selles**

October 31, 2017, marks the 500th anniversary of the date when a little-known German monk nailed a list of ninety-five statements to the door of the church at Wittenberg, Germany. His arguments sparked the Protestant Reformation of the church. Today that monk, Martin Luther, is a well-known figure in history, and his pounding critique against the church of his day still echoes around the world.

At its heart, the movement that Luther and others set in motion called for reform by going back to the Bible's teaching about salvation. The core of this teaching is often referred to (in Latin) as the five *solae*: *sola Scriptura* ("Scripture alone"), *solus Christus* ("Christ alone"), *sola gratia* ("grace alone"), *sola fide* ("faith alone"), and *solī Deo gloria* ("glory to God alone"). Orbiting around the central truth that the *glory* of salvation belongs to *God alone*, the Reformers taught that *Scripture alone* has authority as God's Word to us, that *Christ alone* makes our salvation possible, and that sinners are made right with God by *grace alone* and through *faith alone*. These teachings remain as vital as ever for understanding the good news of salvation.

As we remember the Reformation this month and reflect on its core principles, may we each experience renewal in understanding the depth of God's plan of salvation and his matchless love for us.

*Kurt Selles, director of Back to God Ministries International, is a graduate of Calvin Theological Seminary, and he received his Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University. Kurt previously served as director of the Global Center at Beeson Divinity School, where he also taught missions. He also served as a missionary in Taiwan and China. Kurt and his wife, Vicki, have three adult children.*

**THE REFORMATION: “REVIVE US AGAIN”**

*Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?*

—Psalm 85:6

Five hundred years ago this month, Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, and set in motion a movement that rocked Europe. Though many other factors joined to launch the Protestant Reformation, God used a revival in Luther's heart to start a revival of Christianity in his time.

Our Scripture today from Psalm 85 calls for a revival that begins with the Holy Spirit working in individual hearts, bringing a refreshing return to God with passion and zeal. Revival is not a random burst of energy and emotion but is based on truth found in the Bible. For Luther and other Reformers of the 16th century, the revival that came to be called the Protestant Reformation was based on five enduring principles.

True Christian faith is based on *Scripture alone*, on salvation in *Christ alone*, by *grace alone* and through *faith alone*—and all of this is for *glory to God alone*. These five points summarize the key principles of the Reformation.

Are these five lasting principles at work in our lives? As we ponder these teachings that were rediscovered long ago, may their truth work in our hearts to strengthen and revive us, making us agents of revival wherever God has placed us.

Thank you, Lord, for the way you shape and discipline your church. As we reflect on your salvation this month, we pray with the psalmist: “Revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you.” In Jesus' name, Amen.

**SOLA SCRIPTURA: THE BIBLE ALONE**

*The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit . . . it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.* —Hebrews 4:12

The 19th-century English preacher Charles Spurgeon once said that the Reformation began when Martin Luther found a discarded Bible in his monastery. As he began to read it, God's Word grew like a seed in his heart, and the result was a world-transforming movement.

But this gentle image of a seed is not the way the power of God's Word is described in Hebrews 4:12, one of the key verses in the foundational idea of *sola Scriptura*, or "Scripture alone." Here God's Word is described as a sharp, powerful, and precise blade, dividing truth from the rebellious lies we harbor in our hearts.

Only Scripture has this power—not the traditions of any church, nor the insights of any leader. As Luther said, "A simple layman armed with Scripture is greater than the mightiest pope

without it." Indeed, in speaking about the Reformation that he initiated, Luther said, "I did nothing. The Word did everything."

God's Word, the Bible, has a precision and power you will find nowhere else. Will you let it be active in you? Read it with an open heart. Let it form the words that come from your mouth. Let it shape the actions you take. Only by knowing and living in and through God's Word can we please him and serve him in our daily lives.

Thank you, Lord, for the living and powerful truth of your Word, which alone can penetrate the falsehoods in my heart. Let it drive out the darkness and plant seeds of truth in me today. Amen.

**GOD'S DIVINELY INSPIRED WORD**

*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped. . . . —2 Timothy 3:16-17*

The Bible is exceptional and unique because it is God's own project from beginning to end. This is the foundational teaching of the Reformation, for it is through Scripture alone that God reveals his salvation plan.

The difference between the Bible and other collections of wisdom across the ages and around the world is that those collections are inspired by human wisdom. The Bible, says the apostle Paul, is divinely inspired. The term that Paul uses to describe this inspiration can be simply and profoundly referred to as "God-breathed."

How the Bible is God-breathed is truly a mystery. God the Holy Spirit has spoken universal truth throughout history in all kinds of circumstances. Despite a vast array of personalities with all of their individual gifts, quirks, strengths, and shortcomings,

the Holy Spirit has spoken in and through the many writers of the Bible to his people in the past as well as today.

Because the words of the Bible are "God-breathed," or inspired, they are wholly trustworthy, giving us all we need for faith and for living a life that pleases God.

Are you steeped in God's Word? If not, let it become the bedrock of your daily life, nourishing, challenging, and leading you in pleasing God and loving your neighbor.

Thank you, Lord, for your inspired Word. As I read it each day, guide me to the truths that will equip me with all I need to live faithfully for you. Amen.

## THE DIVINE AUTHORITY OF GOD'S WORD

*The decrees of the LORD are firm, and all of them are righteous.*

—Psalm 19:9

The word *authority* has two common meanings. An authority can be a person who has extensive expertise that can be relied on. Authority can also include the right to make a decision, to direct or control something. In the Protestant Reformation, the teaching about *Scripture alone* made a claim based on both of these meanings.

The Reformers claimed that since the Bible was “God-breathed,” it was speaking God’s message to the world. As such, it has God’s authority for all humankind. Indeed, the Bible informs us that through the power of his word, God made the heavens and the earth, all things visible and invisible. God is the King of his creation, and he has the right to demand our submission.

But the Bible’s authority also operates in the sense of exper-

tise. Through his Word of truth to us, God conveys his expertise as our Creator, Sustainer, and Savior. Who can know the creature better than its Creator? Who knows all that we need, what is best for us, and how we should live in relation to him, to others, and to his creation? God does, and he uses the Bible to teach us these things.

Psalm 19 describes the amazing value and qualities of God’s Word. As you read this psalm, list the ways you can submit to the authority of God’s Word in your life, and commit to pleasing God in all you do and say.

You have the authority to command all I do and say, Lord. You are the expert on my deepest needs and truest aims. Help me to hear and follow your excellent Word. Amen.

## THE CLARITY OF GOD'S WORD

*Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.*

—Psalm 119:105

After explaining something carefully to you, has someone ever asked, “Now, is that as clear as mud?” One wrinkle in the teaching of *Scripture alone* is the clarity and comprehensibility of the Bible’s meaning for human readers.

The Reformers believed that the church of their day had wrongly guarded Scripture by forbidding that it be translated into the common languages of the people and by claiming that only the clergy could interpret its true meaning. Starting with Martin Luther, the Reformers taught that God’s salvation plan in the Bible is clear to ordinary readers who put aside their own biases and depend on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps not everything in Scripture is perfectly clear, but the Bible is clear enough to give guidance for faith and life.

Today’s verse in Psalm 119 calls God’s Word a lamp for our feet and a light on our path. If you have the time, read all of Psalm 119. Using the Hebrew alphabet, this psalm lists from “A to Z” the weight, value, and clarity of God’s Word.

Although you may not understand everything you read in the Bible, if you put aside your biases and ask the Holy Spirit to guide your thoughts and understanding, God’s Word will speak clearly to your heart. Then give thanks for his Word and put it into practice to please and serve him, today and every day.

Thank you, Lord, for your clear and excellent Word. By your Holy Spirit, guide my understanding as I read and listen so that I will find light for my path today. In Jesus, Amen.



## THE POWER OF GOD'S WORD

*He spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.*

—Psalm 33:9

In their teaching about *Scripture alone*, the Reformers expressed confidence in the Bible's "efficacy." Because we seldom use this word in our conversations today, we can easily miss the Reformers' point. *Efficacy* means "the power or ability to produce the intended result."

About the power of the Bible, Martin Luther asked, "What appears to be more meaningless than a word?" Then he added, "Yet when God speaks a word, the thing that the word expresses immediately leaps to life." We see the power of God's word in the act of creation, "For he spoke and it came to be." We see it in God's "sustaining all things by his powerful word" (Hebrews 1:3). And only God's word has the resurrection power to bring all who are dead in their sins to life.

Have you heard God speaking to your heart through his Word, the Bible? If you have known God awhile, think about times when you read or heard God's Word and it sparked a change in you. Think about how God's Word produces beauty and life and blessing. Read God's Word, share it, study it, and ask him to plant it in your heart.

God spoke, and our world came into being. God still speaks through Scripture today, bringing us new life in him for his glory and for us to serve him in the world.

Thank you, Lord, for your creative, life-giving Word. Plant it in my heart and help me to share it with the world you love, so that we may be transformed and blessed for your glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## THE SUFFICIENCY OF GOD'S WORD

*"The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever."*  
—Isaiah 40:8

What's your favorite "desert island" book? In other words, if you were stranded on a desert island, what one book would you want to have with you? Martin Luther would no doubt have answered, "The Bible."

Among the reasons for choosing the Bible as their most important book, Luther and the other Reformers would have certainly mentioned the Good Book's sufficiency: the Bible—and only the Bible—is enough.

The Bible's sufficiency is the final quality included in the Reformation idea of *sola Scriptura* ("Scripture alone"). In it, the Reformers declared that the Bible speaks on everything we need to understand for salvation and living God's way. Though it leaves us ignorant about astronomy (and many other aspects of the physical world), the Bible clearly reveals

and declares that the earth, sun, moon, and stars were made by God and "declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1).

The Bible also helps us understand who we are. In short, the Bible tells us that because of our sin, we desperately need help. And the only One who can save us is Jesus Christ. Further, the Bible tells us how to live in obedience to God and how to love our neighbors and God's creation.

Hopefully you'll never need to choose a "desert island" book, but there is only one book sufficient to guide us into full life with God: his book. Read it. Meditate on it. Live by it.

Lord, help me remember that your Word provides all I need to know about glorifying you and enjoying you forever. Amen.

**SOLUS CHRISTUS: CHRIST ALONE**

*"Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."* —Luke 24:44

From the Reformers' commitment to *Scripture alone* flowed another core teaching: *Christ alone*.

In an age when the church hindered the people in the pews from reading and understanding the clear teaching of Scripture, Martin Luther wrote that "Jesus is the center and the circumference of the Bible." Today many of our children announce this truth before they can even read, when they sing, "Jesus loves me! This I know, for the Bible tells me so."

In our Scripture for today, Jesus says something similar. In effect, he says, "I am the meaning of the Scriptures."

What does the Bible tell us about *Christ alone*? Embedded in this teaching are four key ideas: (1) We need a savior. (2) Jesus was perfectly obedient and sinless. (3) He made a

sacrifice to pay for our sin and rebellion against God. (4) Only through Jesus can we be made right with God.

And it's not just our Scripture for today that points to *Christ alone*. From start to finish—from Genesis 1:1 through Revelation 22:21—all of the Scriptures point to Jesus. He is the main message of God's Word.

As you go through your day, keep these words in mind: "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be in you, above you, beneath you, beside you." And then live abundantly in the truth of *Christ alone*.

As you are the central focus of the Bible, Lord Jesus, may you also be the center and circumference of my life, today and every day. Amen.

## WE NEED A SAVIOR

*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*

—Romans 3:23

Martin Luther had a deep sense of his own sinfulness. For years he was so tormented by his depravity that he came to hate God for his own painful inability to live up to God's standards.

Though perhaps few now have the same deep sense of depravity that tortured Luther, we are all aware of our shortcomings. Deep in our hearts, we know we miss the mark. We are sinners.

Our behavior seldom reveals our private reality. We know the rules, and we can usually play by them. But we have a secret awareness of the depth of our sinfulness. Only we know how hard it is to love our neighbor as ourselves and to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength.

There's just no way to put a happy face on our moral con-

dition. As the apostle Paul says so concisely and accurately: "*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*"

What in the world are we to do?

At perhaps the lowest point in his spiritual life, Luther came to a realization that shook him to his core: we can do nothing to save ourselves. Only in Christ is there freedom. Only in Jesus Christ are we made right with God.

Thanks be to God that being aware of our helplessness delivers us straight to Christ!

Though I hide my sinfulness well, Lord Jesus, I know how totally unworthy I am. I know that I can do nothing to change myself. I need you and you alone. Amen.

## THE PERFECT SAVIOR

*You know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins.  
And in him is no sin.*

—1 John 3:5

First the bad news. We stand condemned before God. Our condemnation goes way back to the guilt we share with Adam and Eve (Genesis 3), as well as to our own rebellion against God. We can do absolutely *nothing* to make ourselves right with God. We are all worthy of eternal separation from God.

Now here's the good news. It's obvious that we desperately need help, but what kind of savior will do? The Reformers saw that *Christ alone* was qualified to be our Savior.

Why is Jesus the only possible Savior of humankind? God's moral law requires perfect obedience and demands punishment for anything less. From his birth to his death, only Jesus was perfectly obedient to God's law. Only in him can new life be found.

Scripture testifies that Jesus, the only perfect one, bore the results of our rebellion. While we were still dead in our sin, God provided the perfect Savior, who alone can make us right with God.

If you've known this good news for a while, savor it anew. Let it wash over you each day and prompt acts of loving service to God and your neighbor.

If you've only been uneasily aware of the bad news but have not yet believed the good, may the Spirit of God move you to see and confess the name of the perfect Savior, Christ Jesus, today!

Only you, Jesus, can be my perfect Savior. Thank you for saving me and guiding me today. Amen.

## CHRIST'S DEATH ON THE CROSS

*He has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.* —Hebrews 9:26

Like all ancient peoples, the Israelites practiced blood sacrifice. The Old Testament provides detailed instructions for a variety of animal sacrifices. Making those sacrifices was a strict requirement of the Old Testament law, in which God said, "It is the blood that makes atonement for one's life" (Leviticus 17:11). In short, without blood sacrifice, there could be no forgiveness of sins.

Through the lens of the New Testament, we now know that Old Testament sacrifices were temporary and provisional. They pointed to the true and complete sacrifice provided by God himself. Today's verses show that Jesus, unblemished by sin, was the perfect sacrifice. We know that the sacrifice of a lamb won't atone for our sins. Only the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God, can do that. His

sacrifice for us is "once for all." No other sacrifice is necessary.

Based on their reading of the Bible, the Reformers rediscovered the truth that Christ's sacrifice has been credited to sinners who could never save themselves. That includes you and me.

Now we are called to offer our lives daily, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 12:1, as "a living sacrifice" to God, glorifying him and serving others.

What will you do today to show your gratitude for Jesus' sacrifice? How will you strive to please God and love those around you?

Jesus, you alone made the perfect sacrifice for sin. Help me, in all I do, to make a pleasing sacrifice of thanks to you. Amen.

## SALVATION IN NO OTHER NAME

*“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven . . . by which we must be saved.”*

—Acts 4:12

In their rallying cry of *Christ alone* the Reformers spoke against the church’s tendency in their time to add requirements for salvation. On the basis of Scripture the Reformers declared that the power to save comes from *Christ alone*—and not from anything else in addition to Jesus.

A single route to salvation may sound strange—if not arrogant—to many in our world today. The assertion *solus Christus*, “Christ alone,” can provoke resistance and even scorn. *That’s just your opinion. How arrogant! How narrow-minded!*

But we who have new life in *Christ alone* know that arrogance plays no part in this declaration. It’s all about humility, recognizing that we can do nothing to save ourselves. We depend totally on Christ for salvation.

We cannot prove to an unbeliever that salvation can be

found in Jesus alone. But we can demonstrate the joy and humility that only salvation in Christ brings to our lives.

The foundational teaching of *Christ alone* is not about religious superiority but about our utter inability to solve our sin problem without Jesus. He is the only one by which human-kind can be saved.

Though we can’t argue others into receiving Jesus as their Savior, we can humbly witness with our words and our actions that only his love has saved us.

Not my job or my money.  
Not my family or church.  
Not my intellect or education.  
Not my good works.  
Only you, Jesus, can save.  
Help me show the world today. Amen.

## PROPHET, PRIEST, AND KING

*"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."*

—Matthew 28:19-20

The 16th-century Reformers weren't only interested in clearing up some muddled theology and challenging some questionable church practices. They were also eager to discern how followers of *Christ alone* should live out the truth of Scripture each day. So they asked, "How then shall we live?"

By declaring *Christ alone* as Savior, we find the answer in him: we must look to Jesus' example. As the Heidelberg Catechism, a confession from the Reformation period, states, Jesus Christ is "our chief prophet . . . our only high priest . . . and our eternal king."

As Prophet, Jesus speaks the truth we need to know. As Priest, his sacrifice has accomplished our deliverance from sin and death, and he now intercedes for us always. As King,

Jesus governs us through his Word and by the Holy Spirit.

As Jesus' followers, we are now his hands and feet in this world, called to continue his work on his behalf. As prophets, we speak God's truth to the world. As priests, we pray for the needs of our world. As ambassadors of the King, we point the way to him and work as citizens in building the kingdom of God.

*Solus Christus: "Christ alone."* How will you speak, pray, and work like Jesus today?

Be present in my life today, Lord Jesus. Help me to speak your truth, pray continually, and work to make this world more like your kingdom. Amen.



**SOLA GRATIA: SALVATION BY GRACE ALONE**

*It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.*  
—Ephesians 2:8-9

Perhaps the most familiar cry of the Reformation is that we are saved by *grace alone*. Opposing the position that we are saved by grace *and* good works, the Reformers firmly stated that our salvation comes only by God's grace.

Consider the darkness of the human heart. If our salvation depended on the good we do, *no one* would be saved. Our very best works are "like filthy rags," as Isaiah 64:6 puts it. The Reformers found Paul's words in Ephesians crystal clear: our salvation cannot be bought or earned by us; as a gift it comes by *grace alone*.

*Grace* means "free and unmerited favor." Salvation is God's gift to us. Anything I might try to do to earn it would be ridiculously inadequate and completely unnecessary. You can't earn a gift. As Frederick Buechner

put it, "Grace is something you can never get but can only be given."

John Newton, who wrote the song "Amazing Grace," was a former slave-trader whose life God turned around. He learned that his salvation could only come by God's grace.

Where should this amazing grace put us? It should drive us to our knees in awe and praise that God loves us. It should shape our thoughts and actions as we strive to love the one who loved us first.

You know, Lord, how much I like to pay my own way. Help me remember and be continually amazed that salvation is a gift from you. I could never earn it. Amen.

## GRACE OF THE TRIUNE GOD

*May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*

—2 Corinthians 13:14

We hear the word *synergy* a lot today. It means “the interaction or cooperation of two or more organizations, substances, or other agents to produce a combined effect greater than the sum of their separate effects.” Whether we like the word or not, it captures an essential truth about salvation. For salvation comes to us through the grace of the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Paul reveals the interconnected work of the Trinity in his closing blessing at the end of 2 Corinthians. This blessing, often spoken by ministers at the close of worship services, clearly describes Father, Son, and Holy Spirit working together with grace, love, and fellowship in perfect harmony, carrying out their grand plan of salvation.

The Father graciously conceives and initiates the plan of salva-

tion and brings it to completion. Jesus, the Son, in perfect unity with the Father, provides salvation for us and gives us his righteousness to live by. The Holy Spirit, also in perfect unity with the Father and the Son, works in our hearts to receive God’s grace with faith, sealing the promise of our salvation in Christ.

From start to finish, through the perfect working of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we see that salvation is by grace alone. May we all live and grow in this marvelous grace!

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we worship you as one. We also give thanks for your grace and mercy, which join us to you and to all your children around the world. Amen.

## THE LORD COMES LOOKING FOR US

*"Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep."*

—Luke 15:6

In business, a cost/benefit analysis involves weighing the overall costs of a commercial activity to achieve the highest profit. With all of the cost involved in retrieving his one lost sheep, shouldn't the shepherd in Jesus' parable have just cut his losses and moved on with the other ninety-nine?

Apparently cost/benefit analysis wasn't used in tending sheep. In those days every single sheep was precious to the shepherd. A good shepherd would leave the other 99 to make a desperate search for one missing sheep. And in rescuing that one pathetic sheep, the shepherd would joyfully sling it over his shoulders to carry it home, gathering family and friends to celebrate when he got there.

In this parable of the lost sheep, the Reformers rediscovered a deep spiritual truth: God

doesn't cut his losses on those who have gone astray. No, he goes after the lost when they are wandering in their sins, heading straight down the path toward destruction.

Just like lost sheep who can't find their way home, neither can sinners. God comes looking for us because we are helpless and hopeless, and because he is full of grace and mercy.

How should we respond to such amazing love? By giving ourselves completely to the one who has rescued us from sin and death.

Lord, you love me so much that you came looking for me. In the same way that your grace has found me, let me share your grace with those around me. Amen.

## THE FATHER'S LOVE AND MERCY

*"This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."*  
—Luke 15:24

Rembrandt's painting *The Return of the Prodigal Son* often moves people to awe. Viewers crowd around the wall in the museum where this massive painting hangs, marveling at the solemn beauty of the father receiving his wayward son.

But as remarkable as Rembrandt's scene of reconciliation is, the father's reception of his son in the parable is even more striking. Even before the son reaches home, the father is watching and waiting. Then, when he sees his son approaching, the dignified head of the household gathers up his robes and dashes out to greet his missing child with hugs and kisses. For Jesus' audience, a father's tossing aside all dignity would have been shocking.

The parable of the lost son completes a series of three stories showing God's boundless

love and mercy for sinners. The first tells about rescuing a lost sheep, and the second tells of finding a lost coin. And in this third parable we meet a father who with urgency and joy runs out to meet his wayward child, who was dead and is now alive, was lost and now is found.

Like the prodigal son, we have all rejected and dishonored our Father. We have squandered our inheritance of being made in his image. Foolishly, we would rather wallow in mud than revel in his embrace. But in grace and mercy the Father comes to us! So let's live with and for him from now on.

When we were lost and dead in our sins, Father, you came to us. Now let us live for you, sharing your love and mercy in a desperate world. Amen.

## CHOSEN FROM BEFORE CREATION

*He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.*  
—Ephesians 1:4

Have you heard what the Calvinist said after tripping down the stairs? “Boy, I’m glad that’s over with!” he muttered, nursing the bruise on his head.

Jokes like these take aim at the doctrine of predestination, or election: God’s choosing of his people even before he made the world. According to critics, predestination quashes human freedom and free will. But somehow, mysteriously, the Bible shows that there is both election and free will.

God’s sovereignty and our human responsibility may be difficult to explain logically, but in the Bible we see lots of examples of both at work. Just think of Paul’s call on the road to Damascus (Acts 9).

In his letters to churches, Paul insists on election, but nowhere does he fully explain the mys-

tery of God’s choosing and how that works with our own will to receive him as Lord and be saved. Nonetheless, Paul describes election as a teaching of great comfort. In his amazing mercy and grace, God loved us even before he created the world!

What’s more, God’s choosing is also a calling. Out of his grace and mercy he has chosen us for acts of love and service so that we can be a part of bringing his love and mercy to the world.

By grace alone, take comfort today in God’s great love and mercy, and glorify him in all you do.

Our Father, through your grace alone you loved us even before you made the world. Help us to love you and glorify you in our lives today. Amen.

## GRACE BRINGS JUSTICE AND MERCY

*When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. —John 19:30*

For many people, the term "ground zero" brings to mind a specific time and place that marks a beginning. For Christians, our ground zero was about 2,000 years ago on a hill outside Jerusalem.

Because he is holy, God had to punish sin. On the cross where Jesus died, God poured out his full wrath against human rebellion. There his justice was satisfied through a sacrifice. The cosmic paradox of the cross, however, is that in the moment of God's greatest anger against sin, we also see his supreme act of love and grace. At the cross, we see that the Father gave his only Son to save us, though we were the ones who deserved to die.

And the Father's sacrifice of his Son is only half of the grace we see at Calvary. Jesus wasn't forced to be a sacrifice for human sin; he freely chose to

offer himself to pay the price for our sin. The death sentence he endured was ours, but he willingly died for us.

Not a single one of us could have endured God's wrath for our sin. Nor could any one of us have chosen to hang on the cross for all sinners. At Calvary, our ground zero, we see the immeasurable depths of salvation by grace alone.

May the love of God the Father and the grace of Jesus Christ shape all we do today.

O Father, at the cross we see your wrath poured out against our sin. Thank you, Jesus, for taking our place. May we live for you in all we do, showing your grace and mercy and sharing your love and good news everywhere. Amen.

## GRACE FOR SINNERS

*"I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

—Mark 2:17

Most of us would rather be around people like ourselves. We feel most comfortable with those who look like us, think like us, talk like us, act like us, and more. We tend to avoid people who are different from us, especially if they have a questionable moral character.

So why would Jesus talk with Levi the tax collector (also called Matthew)? In that day, tax collectors were despised as traitors and thieves among their own people because they grew rich working for the Romans and their emperor. And as if talking to Levi wasn't enough, Jesus also ate at Levi's house with other tax collectors and sinners!

Didn't Jesus care about tainting himself by mingling with such people? He answered, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

The truth is, "sinners" refers to everyone: Jesus' self-righteous accusers, the others at Levi's house, and each one of us as well. Here we see Jesus' grace vividly extended to everyone around him, grace that transforms lives and changes the world. Only Jesus' saving grace can do that.

Only by Jesus' saving grace can we come into right fellowship with God. And once his grace touches our lives, we too should let it flow to those around us, including "tax collectors and sinners."

Dear Jesus, you offer your grace to sinners—and that includes us. Through your grace we are made right with the Father. Help us to extend your grace to everyone around us. In your name, Amen.

## GIVEN BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

*"Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit."*  
—John 3:5

God's grace doesn't just "happen" to come to us. It comes to us from God the Father through the obedience, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And the saving work of Jesus comes to us through the Holy Spirit.

The Bible teaches that we all share the stain of Adam's sin. From the moment we are conceived in our mother's womb, we are in rebellion against God. Our rebellion, though rooted and connected to Adam's first sin, includes our own inescapable inclination to sin. Our hearts are hardened against God: we have plugs in our ears and blinders over our eyes. On our own, we are hopelessly lost.

But the Holy Spirit comes to us and changes our hearts.

The Holy Spirit's work in our hearts is sometimes overlooked

or downplayed. Through the sometimes dramatic though often mundane events of our lives, the Spirit woos us, draws us to him, and moves us toward the love of our Father in heaven. And when—and *only* when—the Holy Spirit has softened our hearts, unstopping our ears and removing the blinders from our eyes, do we turn to God.

We are saved by grace alone through the power and work of the Holy Spirit. Be aware of the Spirit working in your life today, filling you with grace and flowing to those around you.

Creator Spirit, you laid the world's foundations, and you set us free to live in God's love and mercy. Make us your sacred temples to live and serve and glorify our Father. Amen.



**SEALED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT**

*He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.*

—2 Corinthians 1:21-22

Ancient seals were usually carved in stone or etched in metal, and the person using a seal pressed it into soft clay or wax to leave a symbol representing the seal's owner. Like a signature today, a document or other object with a seal conveyed authenticity, authority, and ownership.

In our verses for today, the apostle Paul uses the image of a seal to describe the Holy Spirit's guarantee that we belong to God. As a seal, the Holy Spirit assures us that we belong to God and that nothing will ever separate us from his love (Romans 8:35-39). The Holy Spirit's presence in our lives serves as God's mark on us, as well as a guarantee or deposit, showing that in belonging to God we will flourish and grow in our walk with Jesus.

Is this sealing work something that we do?

The short answer is an emphatic "No!" The Holy Spirit's work in our hearts proves that we are saved by grace alone.

The longer answer reminds us that once we have been saved by grace, our lives are transformed as we cooperate with the Spirit in reflecting God's grace in the world around us.

Sealed by the Holy Spirit, live in grace today and let grace flow to everyone around you.

God, you have sealed our hearts with your Holy Spirit. In our fears and our doubts, let your Spirit speak to us and through us so that we may know and share the love of Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.

**SOLA FIDE: FAITH, THE CHANNEL OF GRACE**

*It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.*  
—Ephesians 2:8

The word *faith* can have several meanings. Sometimes it means simple assent to a fact or an idea as true. Sometimes it refers to a body of religious teaching. In the Bible it can sometimes refer to a special amount of faith, as in “a faith that can move mountains” (1 Corinthians 13:2). But the most common use of *faith* refers to an implicit trust or reliance on something or someone.

For Christians, that sense of trust or reliance points to saving faith in Jesus Christ. As Ephesians 2:8 points out, we are saved by grace “through faith.” In contrast to the church teaching of his time, Martin Luther rediscovered that salvation is by grace and is received *through* faith. Grace wrapped in faith is the gift of God.

Instead of seeing faith as something required in order to receive grace, Luther found that

faith is a *channel* of God’s grace. In other words, even the faith we need in order to acknowledge Jesus as Lord comes graciously from God through the power of the Holy Spirit. If it were any other way, we could boast: “I found Jesus!”

Paul emphasizes that no boasting is allowed. God finds us. Even the faith to accept Jesus comes through grace alone. Indeed, *grace alone* and *faith alone* are like two sides of the same coin.

In your grace and mercy,  
O Father, you have provided us not only with a Savior but also with the faith to trust in him for our salvation and our lives.  
Thank you. Amen.

## THE NATURE OF SAVING FAITH

*We maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law.*  
—Romans 3:28

Faith in Jesus comes as a gracious gift from God. Through faith imparted by the Holy Spirit, we are made right with God. In Romans 3 we learn what happens when we are given the faith to believe.

Paul lays out a tight argument on the movement from guilt to grace. He reminds his readers that the law revealed to God's people since ancient times does not save. The law convicts us of our sin. And, he exclaims, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

The good news, however, is that we can be made right with God (justified) through believing in Jesus Christ and being credited with his righteousness. Jesus stands in our place. His blood was shed for our sake, so when we believe (have faith) in him as the Savior, we are saved and made right with God.

Again Paul rejects any thoughts of bragging. We can't take any credit for becoming right with God. We only receive the saving power of Jesus' atoning sacrifice through God's grace, grace that extends even to the very act of believing and trusting (having faith) in Jesus.

God's astounding love and mercy bring us to our knees in awe and wonder. Paul himself exuberantly exclaims later, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" (Romans 11:33).

O Father, your wisdom and knowledge are so far beyond us! We worship and praise you for the love you have shown us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

## FAITH AND ACTIONS

*Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.*

—James 2:17

How do faith and actions (good works, obedience) fit together? While recognizing that salvation is completely a gift from God, including the faith necessary for believing in Jesus as Savior, the Reformers were sometimes troubled by James's teaching about faith and actions.

For a while, Martin Luther was so adamant about justification through *faith alone* that he doubted the book of James even belonged in the Bible because of its emphasis on actions and faith. But other Reformers maintained that the importance of grateful actions as a demonstration of faith and a proof against hypocrisy show that James delivers a clear and authoritative word from God.

Perhaps it can help to say, as some have said, "Faith is the beginning of obedience, and obedience is the completion

of faith." That resonates with Ephesians 2:10, where Paul, after teaching that we are saved by grace through faith, adds that we are "created in Christ Jesus to do good works." In other words, a natural result of the Spirit's work to bring us to faith in the loving God is to respond by showing thanks to God and by sharing his love with others. So good works are a natural outcome of faith.

Thankful works *and* obedience can also be a helpful indicator of our growth as Christ followers. In what ways are you showing God's love lately?

Father, you have provided for our salvation in Jesus. Please help us also to show your love and share your good news with others always. Amen.

## GROWING IN FAITH

*Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! —2 Peter 3:18*

God graciously gives us faith to believe in Jesus. And we want to keep going forward in faith and not become stagnant or slide backward.

But we have this assurance in God's Word: just as believing faith in Jesus comes to us as a gracious gift from God through the Holy Spirit, growing in faith also comes to us through God's grace and the Spirit's work.

Now, we can't *make* ourselves grow spiritually, but that doesn't mean we are totally passive either. Somehow we participate with the Holy Spirit in growing spiritually.

In today's verses, Peter urges his readers and us to make every effort to grow. The Spirit works in us to cultivate our faith when we listen to God's Word, through meditating on it and hearing it proclaimed in times

of worship. The Spirit works in our hearts when we turn to our Lord and Savior in prayer for our needs and for the needs of our world. The Spirit also constantly works in us to respond to opportunities to show God's love and share our faith with others.

Encouragement to grow in faith can't be said any better than the Spirit has put it through Peter: "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever!"

Holy Spirit, we praise and thank you for your gift of grace. Please continue to soften our hearts and mold our wills to serve and glorify our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

## SHARING OUR FAITH

*"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."*

—Matthew 28:19

We can't leave the topic of *faith alone* without emphasizing that because we are saved graciously by faith in Jesus, we are also commissioned to share our faith with others.

We have received good news, and this is to be shared with the world. Keeping faith to ourselves would be like keeping everyone's mail and never delivering it through the postal service. Faith, like the mail, needs to be passed along. Unshared faith isn't pointless, but it's not vibrant faith either.

Sharing our faith should be a response of joy, but it's also a charge from Jesus. His commands aren't optional.

Does that mean we need to pass out tracts at the grocery store? Maybe. Does that mean we need to preach on street corners? Maybe. Perhaps those

ways of sharing faith aren't for you. Then try something closer to home. Did you know that most people who become Christians do so through the witness of a personal acquaintance? Maybe the Holy Spirit even used a family member or a friend to speak to your heart.

Surely there's someone in your life who needs to hear about Jesus. Does the thought of sharing your faith make you tremble? If so, remember that Jesus has promised to be with us in sharing our faith—even "to the very end of the age."

Jesus, by grace we have received faith to believe in you. Use us, we pray, to share our faith with others—for your glory. Amen.

**SOLI DEO GLORIA: TO GOD BE THE GLORY!**

*From him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.*  
—Romans 11:36

In our reflection this month on the five *solae* of the Reformation, we have covered a lot of material about *Scripture alone*, *Christ alone*, *grace alone*, and *faith alone*. And now, as we focus for a few days on *glory to God alone*, it's important to note that this teaching is not in any way less significant because it comes last. Indeed, we might even say it is the most important of the five. Without a doubt, God's glory is at the heart of the five core teachings about the truth of our salvation.

*Scripture alone* glorifies God's unique revelation of himself and his plan for salvation. *Christ alone* glorifies God's wisdom and love in sending his only begotten Son. *Grace alone* glorifies God's mercy in reaching out to lost sinners. *Faith alone* glorifies God's gift of faith to channel his love and mercy. So all four

of these key principles point to *God's glory alone*. No one else can claim any credit.

The apostle Paul has God's glory in mind when, after a long explanation about God's plan of salvation, he responds in awe and wonder in the passage we have read today, recognizing that salvation—and indeed all things—come *from* him, *through* him, and *for* him.

As wonderful and amazing as salvation is for us, it is ultimately not about us. What God has done for us echoes his glory. "To [God] be the glory forever!"

Father in heaven, we thank you for your love and mercy. Help us to glorify you in all that we do and say. And help us, we pray, to radiate your glory in the world. Amen.

## GLORY TO NO OTHER

*To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.* —Ephesians 3:21

Today the declaration *glory to God alone* resonates as a clear call to glorify God completely in salvation and in all things. But for Martin Luther and the other Reformers, this call focused on some specific charges against the church of their time.

The Reformers believed that God's gracious gift of salvation had been diminished by intermediaries who detracted from God's glory. They strongly reacted against setting the virgin Mary as a mediator between sinners and God. They also objected to the practice of venerating and praying to saints according to the church calendar. Above all, the Reformers railed against a power-seeking church that itself stood in the way of offering *glory to God alone* in salvation.

Mary's faith, humility, and willingness to serve God should

continue to be a powerful testimony to us. So too should the witness of faith and obedience of the many followers of Jesus who make up the church of all ages. But, like the Reformers, we should be aware that anyone or anything diminishing or even deflecting God's glory in salvation risks becoming an idol.

The Holy Spirit graciously uses many people to bring us to Jesus and to strengthen our faith. Praise God for them—while giving *glory to God alone*.

God in heaven, let nothing stand between us in praising and worshiping you in your grace and glory. We ask this through the power of the Holy Spirit, in Jesus' name. Amen.



**LIVING FOR GOD'S GLORY**

*Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.*  
—1 Corinthians 10:31

In his discussion on Christian freedom, the apostle Paul touches on some important principles for following Jesus. While emphasizing our personal freedom in Christ, he urges that we respect where others are in their spiritual maturity. Embedded in this discussion is the most important principle for Christian living: in everything we do, we are to live for God's glory.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism lays out this lasting principle using the question "What is the chief end of man?" And it answers with a timeless, bed-rock declaration: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."

Though we have all been created to glorify God, because of our sin and rebellion against him we live only to glorify and enjoy ourselves. And the tyranny of

self-glorification brings us no enjoyment, just unending misery.

But, praise God, when we've been saved by grace through faith, the Holy Spirit begins to reorient our lives, nudging, prompting, stirring us to live not for ourselves but for God. And as we grow in glorifying our Lord and Savior, we discover our true, lasting joy and purpose *in God alone*.

Whatever you do today—from the most mundane chore to making the most weighty decision—do it all for God's glory.

By your grace, Father, help us to grow in knowing and loving you and those around us. For only in glorifying you do we fully discover whom you made us to be. Amen.

## THE REFORMATION: A CALL TO FAITHFULNESS

*He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*  
—Philippians 1:6

As we observe the 500th anniversary of the Reformation today, let's praise God for faithful servants like Martin Luther and the other Reformers who sought to revive the church by calling it to return to its biblical moorings.

Reflecting on the five core teachings about our salvation, we can thank God for their call—then and now—to hold fast to *Scripture alone*, *Christ alone*, *grace alone*, and *faith alone* as we give *glory to God alone*. These unchanging truths should be our foundation for understanding salvation, living faithfully for God, and sharing our faith.

While prompting our thanksgiving, looking again at the Reformation should also be a reminder to us that like ocean tides, church movements have ebbs and flows. In our time,

we need to keep affirming and proclaiming the spiritual truths of our salvation. For if our grasp of and commitment to these crucial teachings erode, so will the church and our own spiritual lives.

Still, while striving to persevere in the faith and in faithfulness, we can take comfort that the Lord of the church, Jesus Christ himself, will complete the good work God has started in us and through us.

“To [God] be the glory forever!” (Romans 11:36).

Jesus, Savior and Lord of the church, by your Spirit guide us in understanding the truth that we may live for the praise and glory of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit forever. In your name we pray. Amen.

# KIDS CORNER



**KIDS LOVE THE FUN ADVENTURES OF “LIZ” AND  
HIS REPTILIAN FRIENDS.**

**PARENTS LOVE THE WEB-BASED BIBLE STORIES,  
DISCUSSION GUIDES, AND DEVOTIONS.**

**DON'T MISS ANY OF IT! GET WEEKLY KIDS CORNER  
EMAIL UPDATES.**

**GETKIDSCORNER.COM**



RETURN POSTAGE GUARANTEED  
PORT DE RETOUR GARANTI

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew



**ReFrame**  
Media



**Back to God**  
Ministries International

3475 Mainway  
Burlington, ON L7M 1A9  
P.O. Box 5070, STN LCD 1  
Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8  
905-336-2920

info@todaydevotional.com  
www.todaydevotional.com  
facebook.com/todaydevotional

Periodicals postage paid at  
Palos Heights, Ill., and at addi-  
tional mailing offices.

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew

---



**ReFrame**  
Media



**Back to God**  
Ministries International

6555 West College Drive  
Palos Heights, Illinois 60463  
800-626-3060  
[info@todaydevotional.com](mailto:info@todaydevotional.com)  
[www.todaydevotional.com](http://www.todaydevotional.com)  
[facebook.com/todaydevotional](https://facebook.com/todaydevotional)