



Mar/Apr 2019

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

**BEDROCK
BELIEFS**

ALSO: PROPHET, PRIEST, AND KING

Friends:

Debate, discussion, and declaration shaped the Protestant Reformation. Church leaders sought to understand again all that God has done for us, so they searched the Scriptures and aimed to speak the truth to their contemporaries. The Synod of Dort in 1618-1619 was a months-long conversation. It produced helpful statements about salvation and a sort of policy manual (church order) of how churches might best be organized, as well as a mandate to translate the Scriptures into people's everyday language.



Two things shaped the foundation of their vision: first, how thoroughly God is in charge of everything, and, second, how much God loves and cares about each one of us. The King of the universe embraces us! And nothing, not even our own failures, can take us away from him!

This April, George Vink looks into the bedrock beliefs articulated at the Synod of Dort regarding our salvation. They are powerful reminders of how God loves us as we celebrate Easter.

But first, in March, Pete Byrna leads us into our journey toward Easter as the season of Lent begins. Together we will consider the biblical offices of prophet, priest, and king, how Jesus fulfills all of these roles, and how he commissions us to follow in his footsteps.

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, with the first name "Steven" and the last name "Koster" clearly distinguishable.

—Steven Koster

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“Prophet, Priest, and King”
Pete Byma



“Bedrock Beliefs”
George Vink

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ReFrame
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Prophet, Priest, and King

Pete Byma

What shapes your identity? What drives who you are, what you think, and how you live out your life?

Believers in Jesus Christ find their identity in being united with him (Ephesians 2:1-10; Romans 6:1-14). Jesus, the ultimate Prophet, revealed God's character, saving purposes, and will for our lives as he called everyone to live by the law of love. Jesus, the ultimate High Priest, gives us access to God and mediates on our behalf. He has even taken our place and has sacrificed his own life for us, bearing the burden and the curse of our sins. In this way Jesus brings us into God's presence. He also prays for us constantly. What's more, Jesus is King, reigning and ruling over all things today and forever.

In this month of March, as the season of Lent begins, let's explore these truths more closely. We will see that Jesus, ordained by God the Father and anointed by the Holy Spirit, calls us to follow him in this life-changing identity through faith. We share in Christ's anointing as prophets, priests, and kings and queens serving God in this world.

Pete Byma has served as a pastor of congregations in Michigan and in Washington state. Serving now as a pastor in Grand Rapids, Michigan, he is also a consultant/coach for churches experiencing conflict, and he enjoys equipping and establishing people in ministry. He is married to Cheri, and they have four grown children and six grandchildren. Pete is also a registered soccer official and enjoys bicycling.

A NEW IDENTITY

You have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth.
—1 John 2:20

Have you ever been called a prophet, or a priest, or a king or queen? Probably not often. Most of us rarely think of ourselves that way. But God does. He lifts us up to live a full life of blessing and purpose.

This month we will look at what it means to be prophets, priests, and royal rulers in God's service. Jesus Christ, Son of God the Father, was anointed with the Holy Spirit. As the Bible teaches, Jesus is our chief Prophet. This means he fully reveals to us the will of God and how God calls us to live. Jesus is also our perfect High Priest, who gives us access to God and has delivered us through the one sacrifice of his life for us. What's more, Jesus is our eternal King, who governs us by his Word and Spirit. (See Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 31.)

And we share in his anointing. We are called to believe and

trust in Jesus and to honor his name, to serve as living sacrifices of thanks, and to reign with him forever. So let's consider all these things as the season of Lent helps us focus on Jesus and his sacrifice for us.

As the Spirit of God works in our lives, we gradually become like Jesus. Our identity begins to align with his. Our love and obedience to Christ grow as we carry out our calling (our anointing) as prophets, priests, and rulers who serve God. This becomes our identity.

Let's learn together what this means and how we can live it out in our lives today.

Lord, help us see that you have saved us by grace to share in Jesus' anointing and become like him. Lift us up to serve you. Amen.

ANOINTED WITH JOY

You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.
—Psalm 45:7

This psalm has been called a king's wedding song. It brims with royal pageantry and wedding imagery. The bridegroom here is a king of God's people preparing to marry the one he loves. This psalm was probably used at many royal weddings in ancient Israel.

Later in Israel's history this psalm came to be seen as a picture of the promised Messiah-King, who would come to deliver and unite with God's people. And in the New Testament God's people recognize Jesus as the Messiah-Savior and see the church (God's people) as his bride, based on teachings about a wedding feast in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 22:2; 25:1; Revelation 19:7; 21:2).

The psalmist talks about being anointed with "the oil of joy." The joy we have in Christ as our Savior can be with us

always. And yet we are often distracted by worries and troubles in this world, forgetting the amazing blessings and potential we have as Christ's anointed ones.

Weddings are joyous events. So even as we deal realistically with the struggles of this world—just as Jesus does—we can look forward to full life with him in the kingdom of God. And we can share that good news with others, so that they too can have this joy—now and forever.

With whom can you share the joy of full life today?

Lord Jesus, we long for joy-filled life forever with you. Thank you for anointing us with joy. Guide us to share it with others, for your sake. Amen.

OIL OF GRACE

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

—Psalm 23:5

Most of us wouldn't ask to have oil poured over our heads. Oil is greasy, slippery, and hard to wash off. But people who knew about raising sheep in ancient Israel—and still in some places today—would understand the blessing of anointing.

David, the writer of this psalm, knew a lot about herding sheep. As a caring shepherd, he would have applied olive or grain oil to a sheep's nose and ears. Sheep were often troubled by insects that buzzed about their heads and tried to lay eggs on the moist membranes of the animal's nose and ears. The sheep became distracted and obsessed with keeping those bugs away. So shepherds applied oil as a soothing remedy that kept the pests away.

Relief was immediate. Gone were the aggravation, the frenzy, the irritability, and the rest-

lessness. It was an incredible transformation.

This is a beautiful picture of anointing. Describing himself as a sheep, the psalmist says that the Lord, his shepherd, anoints his head with oil. The calming influence of oil on a sheep's head is meant for us as well. The irritants and annoyances of life disappear.

Can you picture yourself receiving an anointing like that from God? We all need his healing balm to cope with the problems of each day. Allow the good shepherd to anoint you with his grace, mercy, and love.

Lord, thank you for your care for us amid the troubles and annoyances of life. Thank you for providing a way for us to find peace, that we may live for you. In Jesus, Amen.

HE IS THE ONE

The LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; this is the one."

—1 Samuel 16:12

God sends Samuel on a mission to anoint a new king. All Samuel knows is that God will choose one of Jesse's sons. So Samuel prepares Jesse and his sons and invites them to a special ceremony. Jesse brings his seven eldest sons, but God chooses none of them. What? "Are these all the sons you have?" Samuel asks. Jesse explains that the youngest is out tending the family's sheep. So they all wait till the young shepherd arrives.

In this awkward, unlikely scene, we witness an unexpected and awesome pause. God does not make decisions the way people do. And God, not anyone else, will make this choice.

So David the young shepherd is anointed to become king of Israel. God tells Samuel to anoint him because "the LORD looks at the heart" rather than merely outward appearances. And by God's power working

through him, David goes on to become one of the greatest kings in Israel's history.

Jesus, God's Son, is a shepherd too (John 10:11-16). He came to be the *Messiah* ("Anointed One"), the long-promised deliverer of God's people. In a way like Jesse's family had to wait, Israel waited for the Messiah. Jesus was God's chosen one.

You and I are identified and chosen by God too. By his grace and mercy, God anoints us (calls us) to serve him in this world. He calls us to take his good-news message to everyone everywhere. Are you ready?

Thank you, Jesus, for being the one to deliver us from the curse of sin. May we be ready and willing to follow you and to share this good news with others. Amen.

CONSECRATED

Early the next morning Jacob took the stone . . . and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it.
—Genesis 28:18

Apparently people aren't the only things that can be anointed. In this story Jacob anointed a stone with oil.

Jacob had left his family home in Beersheba. He stopped to rest for the night and dreamt of a stairway reaching from earth to heaven. Angels were ascending and descending on it. In the morning Jacob realized that God had been speaking to him. He named the place Bethel, which means "house of God."

Jacob anointed the stone he had used for a pillow—to consecrate it as a symbol of his meeting with God. We see something similar done in the Tent of Meeting, where God met with his people many years later (Exodus 30:22-31). A sacred anointing oil was used to consecrate the ark of the covenant, the lampstands, the altar of incense, and the priests. This oil was special and

not to be used for anything else. Anointing oil was used to consecrate—to set apart, to make holy.

One of my favorite hymns begins with the words "Take my life and let it be, consecrated, Lord, to thee." Our life ought to be totally surrendered to Jesus Christ. We are consecrated as followers of Jesus to let our life flow in ceaseless praise to him.

In what ways can you live out your calling to be consecrated to the Lord today?

Lord, my life is not always fully surrendered to you. I am reminded of my holy anointing before you. Purify my heart, mind, and soul to be devoted to you. In your name, Amen.

OIL OF REPENTANCE

There is a time for everything . . . a time to mourn and a time to dance. . . .
—Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4

Today is Ash Wednesday. Many Christians mark this as the first day of Lent, a season of reflection and repentance leading up to Resurrection Sunday (Easter). In some church traditions a mark of ashes is placed on a person's forehead, as a reminder of sin and of Christ's sacrifice to save us.

In the Old Testament, people put on sackcloth and ashes as a sign of mourning—often because of their sins. They recognized that their sins grieved their Lord and God.

Similarly, people would be anointed with oil as a sign—but not of mourning. Being anointed with oil was a sign of favor and holiness, a calling that God had in mind for you. This was an outward sign of an inner reality. If you or your children have been baptized, the symbolism is similar. Baptism marks us as God's covenant

children, called to be part of his family. The water symbolizes the washing away of sin and the rising to new life we receive in Christ.

Today is a day to confess our sins and to strive toward holiness as we reflect on the journey of Christ to the cross. It is a time to mourn our shaky obedience. But it is also a time to dance. We take comfort and joy in the fact that Christ's sacrifice for us paid the penalty for our sin. We can go forward in calm, delightful assurance that Jesus' anointing becomes ours, with the promise of new life with God forever!

Father, I confess my sins before you. May the gift of Jesus' sacrifice shine in my life today. Bring me to a new place of obedience and service in your kingdom. Amen.

HEALING COMFORT

They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.
—Mark 6:12-13

Jesus sent out his disciples to do his work. Not wanting them to be loaded down, he told them to take along only what they were wearing. Things seemed to be urgent. Jesus wanted them to live by faith, trusting in God to supply their needs.

As they ministered from place to place, they would find both hospitality and hostility, both friends and enemies. Jesus told them to lodge at only one house in each community. And if a place did not welcome or listen to them, they should leave and “shake the dust off” their feet, a cultural statement reflecting the rejection they had been shown. This would imply that the townspeople needed a change of heart.

All in all, the disciples experienced the power of God working through them. They cast out demons and anointed sick people with oil, healing many.

As a pastor, I have anointed people with oil. James 5:14 calls church leaders to pray over sick people and anoint them with oil. For me, it has been a humbling and holy experience. Though God has not always healed these people physically, all were spiritually comforted.

Anointing oil is not meant to seem like a healing potion. God decides when and how to heal—whether it’s on this side of the grave or the other. The oil of anointing is a blessed comfort that reminds people of God’s constant care.

Father, help us to see that the healing we need most is in our hearts and souls. Strengthen us to serve you as long as we live. Amen.

YOU HAVE AN ANOINTING

The anointing you received from him . . . is real, not counterfeit—[so] just as it has taught you, remain in him. —1 John 2:27

Years ago, without my knowledge, I was given a counterfeit 20 dollar bill. I didn't realize it until a clerk eyed me suspiciously while I was paying with cash for something. Because it wasn't the real thing, I had to prove my innocence. Thankfully, I wasn't charged with a crime. But for a short time, I felt caught between the forces of truth and lies.

Two forces are at work in the world today: truth is working by the Holy Spirit, and evil is working by the energy of Satan, the devil, the father of lies. We feel this tension in our lives every day. Sadly, many Christians have one foot in the world and one foot in the life of faith. The Bible calls this lukewarm belief (Revelation 3:15-16).

We are living in days that involve a crisis of faith. The spirit of the antichrist is working in this world. It is vitally impor-

tant to stand strong in the faith and to be able to recognize the lies and deceit of the evil one when they come our way. Having daily devotions and a consistent life of prayer is a beautiful way to carry out your anointing.

This anointing, the Bible tells us, is given to us by God and remains in us. Take comfort in this truth. Satan cannot snatch us away from God's claim on our lives.

"You have an anointing from the Holy One, and . . . you know the truth."

Thank you Lord, for your unfailing love and constant promises. We praise you that our anointing is real and sent by you alone. Keep us strong, we pray. In your name, Amen.

AMEN

Through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God.

—2 Corinthians 1:20

The word *Amen* means "Let it be so." We often say this word at the end of a prayer.

As the apostle Paul shows us, this little word can even help us celebrate our anointing. He reminds us that all God's promises are fulfilled in Christ and that our lives are like an *Amen!* to that fact as we live out the anointing he has given us.

All Christians have been anointed by the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament, the only persons anointed by God were prophets, priests, and kings. Their anointing equipped them for service. As we yield to the work of the Spirit in us, he enables us to serve God and to live godly lives. The Spirit gives us the discernment and wisdom we need in order to serve God faithfully. And in the New Testament we see that we share in Christ's anointing as prophets, priests, and kings and queens.

Why is the Bible so full of this talk of anointing? It all has to do with the glory of God. We are to use our spiritual anointing to God's glory, honor, and praise.

Though you may not usually think of yourself as anointed, or as a prophet, priest, or ruler in God's kingdom, you are. And hopefully you have found a place to serve and use your gifts for the Lord. As you bless others with your time, talent, and treasure, you carry out your anointing.

How are you serving God today as an anointed servant?

Lord Jesus, help me to accept my spiritual anointing. May it inspire me to give glory to your name and to share with others all the goodness of your kingdom. Let it be so; Amen!

GOD'S MOUTHPIECE

"I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" —Numbers 11:29

Everyone knew that Moses was God's mouthpiece. He spoke God's words to the people. So when Moses' assistant Joshua heard about two men speaking words from the Lord, he thought they should stop. But Moses said, "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" Moses wanted more preachers and teachers for Israel. He wanted everyone to have God's Spirit on them.

Many years later, the prophet Joel spoke the same message as a blessing for the future. God said through him, "I will pour out my Spirit on all people." And we know this happened around A.D. 30 when the Holy Spirit came during the Feast of Pentecost (Acts 2).

It can be hard to be friends with prophets. They say things

that people don't want to hear. Many people today don't want anything to do with Jesus. But that is exactly why prophets are needed. The world desperately needs prophets to speak God's truth and mercy.

As God's ambassadors in this broken, hurting world, we are called to be prophets. We are called to confess the Lord's name. We are to bring hope, peace, challenges, reminders, and truth to the people around us. Like it or not, you are a prophet, called to bring the good news of Jesus to the world. How will do that today?

Lord, may we speak your truth faithfully and gracefully today, knowing that your good news is for all people. In Jesus, Amen.

PROPHETS AND PRIESTS

The magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God."

—Exodus 8:19

It's not good for kings and presidents to have advisers who only agree with them and say they are the greatest. Sometimes you have to confront people in power with the truth. But they don't always listen.

God sent Moses as his prophet to speak to Pharaoh, king of Egypt. But Pharaoh didn't recognize God. Pharaoh refused to free God's people, the Israelites, from slavery, so God sent plagues that infested all of Egypt. Pharaoh had magicians of the dark arts, but they had no power to stop the one true God. The magicians warned the king, but he wouldn't listen.

Pharaoh did ask Moses to pray for him a couple of times. In this way he recognized Moses as a priest of God, but Pharaoh didn't take God seriously. As soon as Moses prayed and God provided relief from a plague,

Pharaoh would go back on his word—again and again.

You would think that God would just give up on Pharaoh and destroy him. But God wants to forgive and to restore people to live with justice, doing what's right. That's why he calls us to pray for our enemies. It's not easy to act like priests in that way for others, and yet we keep praying for them even when we don't see any change.

Why? Because God has forgiven and restored us. Though we were his enemies (Romans 5:10), Jesus gave his life for our sake, so that we can have new life and live with justice and love for all. Who are the ones who need your prayers today?

Lord, may we speak your truth and pray faithfully for others, that they may turn and be saved. Amen.

FALSE PROPHETS

"Prophesy against the prophets . . . who prophesy out of their own imagination."
—Ezekiel 13:2

Prophets must speak the true Word of God. There were many times in ancient Israel when people spoke out and led others to believe they were prophets. But they had no revelation from God; God had not sent them. And yet people expected their words to be fulfilled. Through Ezekiel, God reminded the people about those false prophets. They spoke out of their own imagination.

A prophet's main function was to serve as God's representative by communicating God's Word to his people. True prophets never spoke on their own authority or personal opinion.

This remains a warning today to all preachers and teachers. The image of false teachings as a whitewashed, flimsy wall being destroyed is powerful. In a storm it will fall, providing no defense. False teachings and lies have no place in God's king-

dom. They must be rooted out, like weeds that would choke a garden and keep it from bearing good fruits and vegetables.

Today our foundation for truth is God's Word in the Bible. If someone says, "God spoke to me, and God is telling us to do this or that," it should agree with the clear teaching of the Bible. If it does not, it is false. All of the Bible's teaching points to Jesus as the One who saves by God's amazing grace and love, and he calls us to share this good news everywhere. In what ways are you bringing God's news today?

Lord, guard us against our wrong opinions and faulty thinking. Reveal your Word to us more and more so that we may be your faithful witnesses. In your name we pray. Amen.

A PROPHET'S JOB DESCRIPTION

Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up. . . . —Ephesians 4:11-12

It would be a mistake to think of prophets in the Bible as only predicting the future. That was not their task. Their primary role was to make known the Word of God, and this often involved calling people back to obedience to God. They denounced injustice, idolatry, and empty rituals.

It was often dangerous to be a prophet. People mocked, imprisoned, and persecuted God's prophets. Jeremiah, for example, was thrown into a pit of mud, where he would have died if he hadn't been rescued (see Jeremiah 38). Stephen, the first Christian martyr, knew this well. Before he was stoned to death, he asked, "Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute?" (Acts 7:52).

It makes us think twice when we see that God has called us to be prophets. He calls us to

bring his Word to the people around us today.

The blessing comes when we see the church edified. The body of Christ is built up. We grow spiritually over time. We "reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God." We don't have an encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible instantly at our baptism or when we profess our faith. Only in heaven will we reach "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." In the meantime, God's Spirit works in us and through us to bless others and the church.

Lord, thank you for giving good gifts to your children. Help us to use our spiritual gifts to build up your church and the lives of the people around us. Amen.

WHO ARE YOU?

"Who do you say I am?"

—Matthew 16:15

Busyness seems to be driven by a determination not to "miss out on life." Behind much of the rat race of life today is the unexamined assumption that what I do determines who I am.

Jesus did not have that problem. His identity as the Son of God and calling as the Messiah were clear. He never asked a question to which he didn't have the answer. When he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" he did that for their benefit. The disciples looked back and responded with the names of prophets from the past because people believed that the Messiah, their promised deliverer, would be like those prophets.

But Peter had seen enough to know that Jesus was the true Anointed One (Messiah). Peter had an inspired confession of faith. He declared, "You

are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Peter was a prophet as he spoke these words. He affirmed the truth of God, professing that Jesus is the Messiah and Savior. That is what we do as prophets. We share in Christ's calling as prophets when we point to him as the one true Savior and Lord of all.

We are anointed as prophets to tell people who Jesus is. We are called to make Jesus famous.

As a Christian, this is your identity. This is who you are. Whom can you introduce to Jesus today?

Lord Jesus, make me more like you. Make my calling sure. May my heart and my mouth be open to confessing you as Christ, my Lord and Savior, in whose name I pray. Amen.

BE HOLY

"I am the LORD your God, consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy."
—Leviticus 11:44

We set apart a lot of things. When we wash our clothes, we set them apart by colors. We set apart our vegetables from our meat. We set apart our refrigerated things from our frozen items.

To be *holy* means to be "set apart." We are called to distance ourselves from sin and impurity, even as we live among all kinds of people in this world.

By calling his people to be holy, God wanted them to be a shining light of his blessing to the nations (Genesis 12:2-3). But Israel continually failed to be the holy nation God formed them to be. That is why the prophets kept calling them back to living God's way—that is, by loving God with all their heart, mind, and strength and by loving their neighbors as themselves.

This is also our job as prophets today. In this Lenten season, we and others are called back to living for God and showing his love, as Jesus did. The world continues to be shaped by Christians who push back the darkness and reclaim this lost world for Christ.

Sometimes it is a fearful thing to be a prophet. It can also be exciting and fulfilling work. The world needs more prophets today.

You and I are prophets. We are anointed to confess the name of Jesus as Lord and Savior. We are called to love God with our whole being and to share his love with everyone.

Lord, may our lives be holy and pleasing to you. May it be clear that we want to honor you and love others, to your glory. Amen.

CALLED, SET APART

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."

—Jeremiah 1:5

A prophet is called by God. The initiative in making a prophet always rests with God. Being a prophet is not a ministry that anyone can take up. Only false prophets dare to take this up for themselves.

A true prophetic ministry begins with a call from God. Isaiah had a dramatic call (Isaiah 6); he needed this to sustain him through a difficult, disappointing ministry. Jeremiah's call came in a specific word from God when he was young. The Lord said to him, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."

Because of our anointing through the finished work of Jesus, these words to Jeremiah are true of us too. Not only did God set us apart before we

were born, but Jesus also tells us to bring his good news to all nations (Matthew 28:19-20).

God knows where he wants you. When you seek God and draw near to him, his calling will find you. If you are looking for your calling, spend time in God's Word and in worship. Don't rob yourself of God's presence. Ask the Lord for his guidance and direction, and you will find your Spirit-led calling.

Have you heard the Lord's call? Are you fulfilling that call to be his prophet, sharing Christ with others in this world?

Thank you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for giving me a calling. May I obey you and fulfill my calling as a prophet, to your glory. Amen.

SO CLOSE

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession. . . .
—1 Peter 2:9

Have you ever been close to something but not able to retrieve it? Maybe a package is waiting for you at the post office, but you can't get there to pick it up. Or maybe something is drifting away in the water, and you can't reach it. So close—and yet so far.

Is that how you sometimes feel in relation to God? You believe and trust him, but when prayers seem to go unanswered, it can feel as if God has forgotten you.

When we feel that way, it is good to remember that Jesus is our great High Priest. Because of human sin and all the brokenness that comes with it, there is a huge divide between us and God. But Jesus stands as our priest, our mediator who bridges the gap between heaven and earth. He reconciles us with God and invites us to receive the gift of salvation and new life with God forever.

The beautiful assurance we have in Scripture is that God calls us to be priests as well. Priests in the Old Testament cared for God's people by praying on their behalf and bringing God near to them. And now, because of Jesus, we can draw near to God as priests also.

I hope you experience this in worship today. As you pray and as you hear prayers in worship, you are drawing near to God.

The Bible says we are a royal priesthood. It's a special calling as we pray and intercede for others.

Thank you, Lord, for calling us to be priests, for Jesus' sake. Lead us to be faithful in prayer, seeking your will and interceding for others. Amen.

A FAMILY PRIEST

Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of [his children]. . . . This was Job's regular custom. —Job 1:5

Job was a father who thought about his children and their relationship with God. He even made sacrifices for them, as sort of a family priest. "Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts," he thought. We are told he did this regularly.

The true idea of the priesthood was ordained by God. Before Jesus fulfilled the priesthood perfectly, God appointed priests throughout the Old Testament. After bringing his people out of Egypt, God ordained Aaron and his sons to be priests (Exodus 28:1-3). From then on, Aaron's descendants served Israel mainly as mediators between the people and God. This work involved offering sacrifices for the people and fulfilling other regulations required in the law given through Moses (see Leviticus).

At various times in their history when Israel fell away from God, the priesthood declined. Families struggled to find a God-fearing priest descended from Aaron. A priest was needed to mediate between an unholy people and the holy God.

You may not see yourself as a priest, but, like Job, whenever you pray for a family member or another loved one, that is a way of being a priest. Many believers have a long list of people they pray for daily. Are you someone who does that? If so, you are fulfilling the role of a priest.

Father in heaven, bring to mind for me today the people you want me to pray for. May I lift them up before you in love and compassion. Bless them and draw them close to you, Lord. In Jesus, Amen.

NO MORE ALIENATION

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

—Romans 3:23

We will not understand our position as priests if we don't understand that we are sinners.

We must recognize that the Bible's practice of having priests came from our alienation from God. There are no excuses or exceptions: "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." In 1 John 1:8 we read that if anyone says they are without sin, they deceive themselves and the truth is not in them. This is a fundamental part of the truth we have from God.

Job understood this (Job 1:4-5). Concerned that his children might have sinned, he prayed to God, asking the Lord to forgive and cleanse them. In God's grace Job took on the role of a family priest and offered sacrifices for his children. In setting up the temple and worship practices of ancient Israel (Leviticus 1-9), God assigned the role of priest to

offer sacrifices as a sign of forgiveness of sins for the people.

In its final development, the priesthood is fulfilled in the finished work of Jesus Christ, our perfect High Priest. He shed his blood as the ultimate sacrificial lamb and took away our sins, "once for all" (Hebrews 9:26; 10:10). Because of Jesus' own work as priest we are no longer alienated from God.

We are forgiven our sins and set free through the blood of Christ, given for us. Let's celebrate this freedom by sharing this good news today!

We praise you, Lord Jesus, for being our ultimate High Priest. Thank you for paying for our sins through your perfect sacrifice once and for all. In your name we pray. Amen.

NEVER DISAPPOINTED

Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.

—Hebrews 7:26

All of us know what it's like to be disappointed. And we can never live up to other people's expectations.

We do well to remember these things in our fellowship in the church. I often describe church as "one beggar telling another beggar where to find food." Each and every gathering of Christians is meant to increase our fellowship in the name of Jesus and to find unity through his Spirit. We need this gathering of believers because we are fallen, frail, weak human beings.

As our ultimate High Priest, Jesus meets our deepest need. This is wonderful news. In the midst of our losses, poor health, struggles, and deep pains, our Lord and King provides the assurance that our destiny is secure in him forever. In Jesus we will never be disappointed.

As our High Priest, Jesus represents us before the Father in heaven. So we can be assured that Christ is on our side. He knows us, and he knows what we are going through. He sees our lives and is our advocate before God, interceding for us always.

As God calls us to be priests, we can meet the needs of others as well. We do that through being good neighbors, visiting the sick, providing a meal, and being an encourager to everyone we meet. When we share the gospel of salvation with the people around us, we are being Christlike. We are being priests.

Lord, thank you that you never let us down. Help us to lift others up and to encourage all who serve you and your kingdom. Amen.

A HOLY PRIESTHOOD

You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.
—1 Peter 2:5

In the Old Testament, God's people had a priesthood. Just as people in a church know who their pastor is, God's people in Israel knew who their priests were. A whole tribe, the Levites, were set aside to lead Israel as priests and worship leaders.

Today all of God's people are a holy priesthood. Each believer has the privilege of coming into the presence of God—not through a local priest or on one's own but through the one Mediator, Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:1-6).

What a privilege this is! Unlike the Old Testament priests, we don't have to wear special garments, go through elaborate ceremonies, or live apart from the people we serve. Today God is building us into a wonderful spiritual house.

Being a priest involves an individual calling and a corporate calling. Each believer is a priest, and together we are all priests. Any body of believers must strive to act as priests who are holy to God. The apostle Paul calls us to be living sacrifices; this is our spiritual act of worship (Romans 12:1).

We may be tempted to step back and shy away from being called a priest. But the Bible calls us to step forward and embrace this role. Following Jesus' example of praying for and caring for others, how can you serve as a priest today?

Father in heaven, you have called me to be a priest here on earth. Help me to love and be a living sacrifice for you and your kingdom. In Jesus, Amen.

AMBASSADORS

He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors. —2 Corinthians 5:19-20

An ambassador is an official envoy, a high-ranking diplomat who serves as one nation's representative to another nation.

As priests serving in Christ's kingdom, we are ambassadors.

This means that an ambassador lives at your house. You represent God. You are an official agent commissioned to bring God's message of reconciliation to the world.

As Christians, we are called to use this status to minister to others in a way that leads people to be reconciled with God and with each other. This is an awesome and humbling task.

The world needs ambassadors for Christ today. The world claims that when conflict or tensions arise, they can't be repaired. So we live with fractured pieces and ongoing tensions everywhere.

But the Word of God says something different. As priests, we have been given the ministry of reconciliation. We are to bring peace and unity to relationships everywhere.

When we seek peace in our relationships by reconciling one to another, we are being priests. This is needed in this dark and hurting world.

Are you willing to accept the responsibility of being a reconciler—a priest and ambassador in God's kingdom?

Lord, thank you for using me as your instrument today. May I be an agent of reconciliation as your ambassador in this world. Amen.

GRAND FINALE

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

—Revelation 1:5-6

Often at the close of a great symphony, or a concert, or a fireworks show, we are treated to a grand finale. With fireworks, the bursts are loud and long and beautiful. The whole night sky above us lights up. To me, it's always worth staying up for; I love the grand finale.

As a grand finale in God's Word to us, the book of Revelation reminds us that we are priests. Today Jesus rules on the throne. He is our ultimate Priest and King forever, and he "has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father." The priesthood and kingship of Jesus are eternal. That's what we can look forward to as priests of God almighty.

Revelation 5 also describes a scene in which the hosts of heaven hail Jesus as the King of all kings. Why? "Because

... with your blood," they say, "you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth." So the song rings out: "Worthy is [Jesus] the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"

We are priests serving in God's kingdom forever. And this is all to the Lord's glory and honor. Thanks be to God!

Lord Jesus, keep us faithful as your prophets and priests. Lead us to people and places that need your Word and care. In your name we pray. Amen.

THE KING OF GLORY

The LORD Almighty—he is the King of glory.

—Psalm 24:10

The gates of Jerusalem had quite a story to tell. It was a story of royalty, glory, splendor, and victory. From the glory days of Israel's great King David, Psalm 24 reminds us that the gates of Jerusalem were important for God's people beyond giving protection and access to the city.

In Psalm 24 the gates of the holy city are personified for welcoming the coming King. A jubilant reception awaits the King of glory, the Lord Almighty. The doors are opened; the gates are lifted high. "Lift up your heads, you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors," says this psalm, emphasizing that the entrance isn't high enough to accommodate the glory of the one true King of all kings.

Today as you worship, you may hear these special words in a reading of Psalm 24. Though

our earthly worship may fall short, the matchless King of heaven, the Lord Almighty, graciously receives our praise.

Our task is to spread the news of our great Lord and Savior. People may ask us, "Who is this King of glory?" As followers of the King, who calls us into his reign and rule, we too have quite a story to tell.

In this time of Lent, as we walk closer to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross for our sake, may our heads be lifted up in praise and worship.

Heavenly Father, as we worship and praise you today, help us to glimpse your glory and majesty. Bring us closer to you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

A KING IN TRAINING

"Be sure to appoint over you a king the LORD your God chooses."
—Deuteronomy 17:15

Shasta is the main character in C.S. Lewis's book *The Horse and His Boy*. An orphan of unknown background, he is raised by a poor fisherman. One day Shasta discovers he is on the verge of being sold into slavery. So he escapes with Bree, a talking horse, and the two head north for Bree's homeland, Narnia. Shasta is overjoyed. He's been longing his whole life to go north, and Bree actually suspects that Shasta is from there. Through a series of adventures Shasta discovers that he belongs to a royal family, and he is actually the long-lost son of a king.

We too are royalty, though we may not be aware of it. Welcomed into the family of God, we are sons and daughters of the King (Matthew 25:34; John 1:12-13; Romans 8:14-17).

In Deuteronomy 17, God lays out the qualifications and conditions for Israel's future kings. God knows what his people need, and he knows the troubles a king will bring them. The king must be someone whom God has chosen, and it will be very important that the king is humble. (That's hard when you're a king.) The king should not think more of himself than of others. Further, the king was to guide God's people in living the way God called them to live. In this way they would be a blessing to other nations (Genesis 12:2-3).

As children of God, this is how we are called to live as well.

Father, help me to see how you call me to reign with you. May my eyes and my heart be opened to this high calling of being a ruler for you in this world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WHAT THE KING RIDES

See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey. . . .
—Zechariah 9:9

In this Lenten season as we reflect on the sacrifice of Christ, we see him riding a donkey as he comes to Jerusalem as King. This animal was symbolic of humility, peace, and King David's royalty (see also 1 Kings 1:33). Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey to show publicly that he was the chosen Son of David (another name for the promised Messiah).

We might have expected a stallion. But this surprising King rides a donkey. Jesus identifies with the lowly. The kingdom of God is totally different from the here-today, gone-tomorrow kingdoms of the world. Don't mistake this King on a donkey for the kind of ruler we usually see in this world.

From Jesus we learn that being a king in God's kingdom is about service and humility. A king serves. So, as we fulfill

our calling, we serve the Lord and we serve one another. As we live by the guidance of the Spirit, visit people who are sick, care for those who are poor, and love our neighbors, we are kings and queens of the kingdom of heaven. That is when we are most like Jesus, who calls us to reign with him today and for eternity.

Jesus once came riding on a donkey. Next he will come riding on the clouds of heaven (Mark 14:61-62) to live with us in the new heaven and earth forever (Revelation 21-22). Come, Lord Jesus!

King Jesus, come quickly. Reveal your reign and rule in the world today, and call us to our place within it. In your name we pray. Amen.

CHRIST'S REIGN AND RULE

If we endure, we will also reign with him.

—2 Timothy 2:12

As Christ reigns and rules forever, we also will live and reign with him forever.

Genesis 1-2 and Psalm 8 remind us that God made us the crown of his creation and appointed us to take care of it and rule over it for his glory. Because of sin we forfeited our ability to do this completely, but Christ has succeeded in reigning over creation as a fully human being who is also fully God.

So let us look forward to the final day when the reign and rule of Christ is perfectly realized.

In the meantime, let us not forget that we are even now reigning with our Savior. Sin no longer has dominion over those who believe in Jesus, for we live in the gracious era in which we have been adopted as God's children (Romans

8:14-17; Galatians 3:26-4:7). By the power of the Holy Spirit, we can now conquer sin and grow in holiness. We are also free from the tyranny of the law. Forgiven in Christ, we may fulfill the royal law of love in serving our Creator.

We may not often think of ourselves as kings and queens who rule over (take care of) creation, but this result of being saved in Christ connects us with who we are created to be in the first place. Our salvation sets us back on our rightful throne.

Lord, you have set us to rule with you in this world. Help us to be victorious over sin today, care wisely for your creation, and act with your love and justice for all. Amen.

RESCUED

He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves. . . .

—Colossians 1:13

In the change of seasons, springtime brings longer days and shorter nights. So, in a sense, as we move from winter into spring and summer, we leave behind days of darkness as each day brings more light.

The apostle Paul often uses the image of light and dark to talk about our spiritual condition. The point here is that we are not only delivered out of something but are also brought into something as well.

As followers of Jesus, we are transferred into the kingdom of light. We “share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.” Light often symbolizes glory, truth, holiness, and life. It has to do with the authority and sovereign rule of the King. Because of Christ’s work to save us from sin, we are no longer in the dominion of darkness. We are freed to

live fully in the precious, grace-filled, compassionate, and loving rule of Christ. Christ shares this kingdom with us.

C.S. Lewis once said, “We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with worldly ambitions when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

Today, let yourself be rescued, and enjoy the life of light that Jesus offers. Then share that light with others!

Father, take us away from our own dark sin and bring us into your wonderful light. Make us shining examples of full life in your kingdom. In Jesus, Amen.

IT'S NEAR

"The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"
—Mark 1:15

According to a 2016 Barna Group study of spirituality, 72 percent of people in the United States call themselves Christians, but only 31 percent practice their faith. This research also revealed that only 35 percent of believing Christians go to church more than twice a month. And although 75 percent say they pray, only 19 percent read their Bible.

Looking at these statistics, we might not think the kingdom of God is near. In fact, there can be times when it seems rather far away. When Jesus says, "The kingdom of God has come near," what does he mean?

It's less of a place and more of a presence and a way of life. The rule and reign of Christ is around us and in us. Jesus wants us to know that God's authority and power will not be denied. It can be found in all followers of Jesus. As kings,

we carry out God's kingdom purposes in our worship, service, and obedient living.

Through Christ, you and I can live today in the kingdom of God, although the ways of darkness and sin and the devil still influence this world. When we seek God's agenda for our lives, when we live for his purposes and glory, we are kings and queens reigning with Christ. Don't let the devil and his lies have any place in your life. God's kingdom is near, and God wants to work in us and through us to bring goodness and light into this world.

Lord, may your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. Bring your full authority into our lives and into this world, we pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THIN PLACES

In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.
—Romans 8:37

This month we have looked at what it means to be prophets and priests and to serve our Lord as kings and queens. All people who believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior share these roles as God works in us and through us to make us more like him.

Celtic spirituality speaks of “thin places,” where the natural and spiritual come together, as if separated only by a thin veil. Many examples in nature reveal this. We see it in the beauty and intricacies of flowers and fruit trees, the human body, coral reefs, majestic mountains, and much more. We see it in the delicate balance of countless species that depend on each another. There are also times when our prayers and Scripture reading come alive and we sense the Holy Spirit at work. We can also see this in good literature

based on Jesus’ teaching, and in world affairs in which leaders aim to do what is right and good for all people.

When we think of ourselves as prophets, priests, and kings and queens, we find our identity. The Lord and King who loves us has brought us into fellowship with himself. Our task is to have faith and believe and to show that God reigns in our lives.

Today, live like a child of the king, a priest of the Lord, and a prophet of the most high God.

Father God, remind me today of who I am—that I am your beloved child and that you care for me. You love me so much that you sent your Son to die for me. May I follow you in faith and obedience. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

TOWARD THE CROSS

"Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it."
—Luke 17:33

As this season of Lent continues, we come closer and closer to the dangerous cross. We realize that Jesus Christ paid an enormous price for our salvation. And he did so willingly as he "resolutely set out for Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). As the Anointed One (Messiah), Jesus was obedient to God the Father.

As our chief Prophet, Jesus revealed to us the will of God concerning our salvation. As our only High Priest, the one sacrifice of his body paid the penalty for our sins. And today as our eternal King, he governs us through his Word and Spirit, always defending and preserving us for work in his kingdom.

God calls us to join in this holy work as prophets, priests, and rulers serving the King. We too are anointed and share in this grand work of redeeming love. As we worship, pray, share his

good news, and bring blessing to others, we grow nearer to God and help to bring others into his presence.

The words of Jesus in today's verse remind us that if we shy away from the things of God's kingdom, we will miss out on the full life God intends for us. If we accept and embrace our Spirit-led and true identity, we will experience everlasting life in Jesus Christ. As we proceed toward becoming more like Christ, we may lose our life as we now know it, but we will gain so much more—eternity with him.

Thank you, Lord, for new life in Christ. May I live to the glory and majesty of the true Prophet, Priest, and King, in whose name I pray. Amen.

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Bedrock Beliefs

George Vink

Across the centuries, followers of Jesus have found that it's not always easy to understand the Bible as our guide for living. And, at times, there have been disagreements over faulty interpretations and false teachings. The 16th-century Reformation in Europe was a time like that. Some leaders saw that the church needed reform because it had added teachings outside the truth of the Bible. Turning back to the truth, a number of churches formed in various parts of Europe. But then they too ran into different interpretations of the Bible. So churches had gatherings that they called "synods" to sort out teachings that were true from those that were false.

This year we are celebrating the 400th anniversary of the Synod of Dort, which held meetings in 1618-19. That synod helped many churches to clear up questions on five main teachings about salvation, all based on the Bible: (1) we are miserably lost in sin; (2) we are chosen by God to be saved; (3) we are saved through Christ's death for our sake; (4) we are renewed and transformed by the Holy Spirit; and (5) we are held safe in God's care forever. The Synod of Dort's decisions on these points are known as the Canons of Dort.

Back to God Ministries International, the parent ministry of ReFrame Media and these *Today* devotions, holds to these five teachings as bedrock beliefs of the Christian faith. As we reflect on these insights together this month, may they help us all gain or regain a firm foundation for our faith in Christ. To God be the glory!

George Vink served as a church pastor for over 40 years in Michigan, British Columbia, Montana, and California. Since retirement, he and his wife, Shirley, have continued to serve churches in interim ministry. The Vinks have four sons and eleven grandchildren.

BASED ON THE BIBLE

They received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

—Acts 17:11

The people in Berea, as our text explains, carefully examined the Scriptures to make sure Paul's teaching was true.

When I was a young pastor, I liked to think I knew a lot about Scripture. I had studied, and I knew many of the important teachings of the Bible. Today I am older and hopefully a little wiser. I know now how little I knew back then, and I realize how little I still know today, after years of studying and teaching. The Bible has so much to teach us that we keep learning as we grow in faith.

In Paul's day, the people in Berea didn't have the Bible as we know it. They had the Hebrew Scriptures that make up the Old Testament in our Bibles today. So, to examine Paul's teaching about Jesus as Savior (Messiah), they had to do some heavy study of Isaiah

and other prophecies. I picture them pondering and having discussions at tables with scrolls unrolled—and then exclaiming, "Paul's right—listen to this!"

Many years later, in 1618-19, a gathering of church leaders searched God's Word as the Bereans had done. They needed to know if some teachings by other leaders were true. And their findings, known as the Canons of Dort, still help us today in stating the bedrock truths about salvation from sin. So let's revisit those truths this month as a way of celebrating that helpful work—and especially God's gift of salvation!

Lord, thank you for your Word of truth. Help us to seek the truth and to share your good news of salvation everywhere. Amen.

CHOSEN, LOVED, CALLED

[God] chose us in [Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.
—Ephesians 1:4

Did you know that God's gift of salvation for us started even before he created the world? Incredible!

This basic truth can really stretch our minds, and it shows us that God's thinking is far beyond ours. Even when we think of all that God did to create our world—from the universe, to our galaxy, to our planet, to all the plant and animal life around us, and to us humans—we are filled with awe and wonder. But then, to think that God chose us one by one to be saved in Christ even before he made all of this—it goes beyond our ability to understand.

So there is great mystery here. But this doesn't mean we are left confused or without understanding. As our Creator, God knows our minds, and God knows we can understand what it means to be chosen, and loved, and called to be holy.

So he tells us those things in his Word to us—and much more. And even though we can't understand all that God does, or why, we can be sure that he loves us and wants what is best for us. Far back in eternity God made plans to adopt us into his family so that we can have full life forever instead of dying in our sin and misery.

This month, as we reflect on the Canons of Dort, we'll be thinking a lot about our sin and God's gift of salvation for us. So it's important to know that before all of that happened, God chose us in love to be his children.

Gracious God, thank for calling us to be your beloved children in a world that is broken and burdened with sin. Help us to share your love everywhere. In Jesus, Amen.

MESSED UP

They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised.
—Romans 1:25

Viewing a stunning panorama from a mountaintop, gazing up at a sky filled with stars, or admiring a glorious sunset, we are often filled with awe and wonder at our Creator. Even many people who don't acknowledge the God of the Bible will exclaim, "Such beauty didn't just happen by accident!"

In Romans 1, the apostle Paul explains that God made his "eternal power and divine nature" clear since the creation of the world, so there is no excuse for anyone who may claim they are not aware of God.

It's a matter of opening eyes of faith and focusing on God instead of ourselves. God made us to glorify him and look to the needs of others, as he does for us. But too often we follow our own desires and ignore God, exchanging the truth for a lie (see Genesis 3:6). When we

push God aside and pour all our energy into other things—career, sports, pleasure, politics, hobbies, trends, and more—we serve those things rather than the Creator. We glorify them instead of the God who made us. We mess up the good life he created us to enjoy.

If God didn't step in to save us, we would have been lost forever. So in response to God's love, let's not listen to lies like "There is no God" or "I am number one." Instead, knowing the truth revealed in Jesus, we can shout our praise: "Thanks be to God, our Savior!"

Creator God, we know we are inclined to sin and to focus on ourselves. Thank you for sending Jesus to save us, and help us to live to your glory. Amen.

OUR CORRUPTION

"I don't know," [Cain] replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?" The LORD said, "What have you done?" —Genesis 4:9-10

In its opening chapters, the Bible makes clear that God created the world and all its creatures. And as the crown of his creation God made human beings—us!—in his own image. Back then we had a unique holiness. But it didn't take long for us to experience a fall and corruption. (See Genesis 1-3.)

Cain and Abel sadly illustrate the results of our fall into sin and its deadly corruption. The Canons of Dort say, "Human beings brought forth children of the same nature as themselves after the fall. . . . Being corrupt they brought forth corrupt children. The corruption spread . . . from Adam and Eve to all their descendants—except for Christ alone. . . ."

As our story today shows, Abel gave God the best from his flock, but Cain gave only "some of the fruits" of his work. So God "looked with favor" on

Abel's offering, but not Cain's. Cain could not tolerate that. So in envy he took his brother's life, doing as he pleased. Cain ignored God's plea to do what is right. Even though Abel was also sinful, Cain had no right to kill an imagebearer of God.

Calling Cain to account, God thundered, "What have you done?" God still asks us that today when we do as we please and hurt others: "What have you done? Has not my Son, Jesus, shown you how to live?"

Creator God, thank you for the grace and favor you have shown us in Christ. Fill us with your wisdom, and guide us not to give in to temptation to please ourselves. Help us to be like Jesus. Amen.

NOAH AND THE LORD

The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become. . . . But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.

—Genesis 6:5, 8

Today's story takes place many centuries after the time of Cain and Abel. Human nature hasn't improved! The Canons of Dort expand on humanity's corruption, saying, "All people are . . . inclined to evil, dead in their sins, and slaves to sin." These are discouraging and upsetting words!

Lamenting "the wickedness of the human race," Genesis describes God as regretting that he ever made human beings. Deeply troubled, God said, "I will wipe [them] from the face of the earth." And yet a ray of hope follows: "But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD." The word "but" signals a change of direction. We are corrupt, but there is hope for us. We fall into sin, but God lifts us up. We despair, but God brings joy.

The Canons of Dort sound so harsh in their assessment of

our corruption, but they also add that it's possible for us to turn back to God by "the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit." We cannot reform our corrupted nature or even begin to renew ourselves, but God can.

God can work in us to do good. Somehow Noah "walked faithfully with God," and when the Lord told Noah to build an ark and prepare for a flood, Noah did "as God commanded him." Today let us thank God for working in us even more by his Spirit through Christ our Savior!

Lord, thank you for not destroying humanity then and now. May the gift of your Spirit today move us to become more like Jesus daily. In his name, Amen.

BY GRACE AND THROUGH FAITH

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.
—Romans 3:23-24

As the Canons of Dort say, “God would have done no one an injustice” if he had left all people “in sin and under the curse” of death. For “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” says Paul in our reading for today, and in Romans 6:23 Paul adds, “For the wages of sin is death. . . .”

It’s clear, whether you’re a designer in New York, a tour boat operator in Amsterdam, a farmer in Kenya, or a factory worker in Brazil—you’re a sinner who falls short, deprived of God’s glory. We are all incapable of saving ourselves from the quagmire of sin. We are stuck in this misery and totally unable to do any good that could help us earn our way out.

Yet there’s hope. There’s more to be learned as we read God’s Word. There’s a righteousness that we can’t earn but that “is

given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”

This good news is also announced in Romans 6:23, which reads in full, “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” John 3:16 also declares the good news of God’s grace and mercy: “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Hear these words and let them sink in. Repeat them often. God’s gifts in Jesus give us life!

Lord Jesus, thank you for making us right with God through your loving sacrifice for us. Help us to live for you and share this good news with others. Amen.

LIGHT HAS COME

God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. . . . This is the verdict: Light has come into the world. . . .
—John 3:17-19

A message on a rancher's barn by the highway said, "Jesus Is the Answer!" I wondered, "But do we know the question?"

Even if people hear the words "Jesus is the Savior," do they know what we need to be saved from? Or why it matters?

The apostle John wrote, "The true light that gives light to everyone . . . was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him" (John 1:9-10).

The need for Jesus as the answer to our problem of sin and death may not seem obvious. We have to recognize our miserable condition. People who bring God's Word to others have to explain what our sin is and why it's a problem. As the Canons of Dort say, "In order that people may be brought to faith, God mercifully sends messengers of this very joyful

message to the people and at the time he wills. By this ministry people are called to repentance and faith in Christ," who gave his own perfect life to pay the debt for all our sin.

God still sends messengers to explain why we need salvation and how Jesus alone made it possible for us to be saved. The gift of salvation is for all who believe and recognize Jesus as the Savior, the true light of the world. His light helps us see plainly that we have sinned and we are stuck in sin. And he provides the only way out. Is he lighting your way today?

Jesus, thank you for coming to save us from sin and death. Light our way and help us to shine your light for others. Amen.

BEAUTIFUL FEET

How can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? . . . "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" —Romans 10:14-15

I grew up in a family that went to church every Sunday. And I remember how my parents insisted that our Sunday shoes should always be clean and polished. As the youngest boy, I had the Saturday duty of polishing many pairs of shoes. When I preach, I still make sure my shoes are shiny. But that's not what Paul is referring to when he talks about beautiful feet bringing good news.

Paul quotes a line from Isaiah that has to do with bringing news throughout the land. In ancient times, messengers were sent to the king and to major cities to bring news about battles or attacks from other nations. The messengers often ran a long way, and their feet got dirty and bloody. But when the message was good news, those tortured and bleeding feet were considered beautiful. So Isaiah used that imag-

ery to describe a messenger who brought the good news of salvation and peace, announcing, "Your God reigns!" (Isaiah 52:7).

In our world of bullets and bombs, we need messengers of good news. There can be peace. Being reconciled with God and one another is possible! Jesus, the Savior, sends us with his good news, saying, "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19).

We have good news to bring! People won't look at our feet, but they will see the joy on our faces as we share that God reigns and loves us.

Lord, empower us to share with joy the good news of your love for your world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

RESPONSE NEEDED!

Did they not hear? Of course they did: "Their voice has gone out into all the earth. . . ."
—Romans 10:18

Once in a while my wife asks, "Didn't you hear me?" As an aging retiree, I could probably use an excuse about hearing loss. But that's not the kind of hearing Paul is talking about.

In our verse for today, Paul is quoting Psalm 19, which speaks of the heavens declaring God's glory. But, as we know, not everyone pays attention to that message. The same happens when messengers bring the good news of God's salvation. People don't always listen. So it's not just a matter of hearing. Paul puts it plainly: "Did they not hear? Of course they did." It's a matter of paying attention and responding!

We must understand there's a "Twofold Response to the Gospel," as the Canons of Dort put it. People respond with belief and acceptance, or they refuse to believe. Those who accept the gospel and embrace

Jesus as Savior in true faith respond with genuine worship, grateful living, and a sure hope for eternal life. It's humbling and important to realize this truth: "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).

The gift of true faith leads to praise and worship. Will you worship the Lord and Savior today?

Lord, forgive us when we fail to respond in worship, giving thanks for your gifts of life and love. Lead us to recognize you and to see the signs of your love everywhere. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WORTHY OF SUFFERING?

It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him.
—Philippians 1:29

In our Scripture for today, the apostle Paul is not sure whether he will be able to visit his readers in Philippi. But “whatever happens,” he says, “conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” Accepting the gift of faith in Christ means more than having a reservation in heaven. God calls us into an eternal relationship with consequences.

The life of the believer is not designed to be one of leisure or merely looking forward to an eternal reward. We’re here on a mission, chosen by God to do his will and his work in this world. We must realize that this is serious business. It’s more than holding to certain beliefs to escape total destruction. It’s a way of life calling for sacrifice. It may include suffering. Living for Christ can be costly!

Paul experienced joy as he shared the gospel, but he also endured painful rejection and physical suffering. Following Jesus is a call to obedience, a discipleship of duty. Conducting ourselves in a “manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” means serving him in all areas of life, no matter what consequences we might face. It applies every hour, every day.

Being given an opportunity to suffer for Jesus sounds unusual. And yet it’s a gift. We have to experience it before we can understand. Are we willing?

Jesus, help me to realize that you suffered for my sake. Empower me to be willing to suffer for you and your kingdom, no matter what. In your name I pray. Amen.

COMPASSION

"A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out."
—Isaiah 42:3

The Canons of Dort note that "our merciful God has promised not to snuff out a smoldering wick or break a bruised reed." It says this to show God's compassion and to encourage anyone who feels they are not doing very well in the new life they have in Christ. Anyone who is dealing with doubts or feeling like a failure should not despair and think they might lose their salvation. God's mercy and grace go deeper than we could imagine.

Remember always, as Romans 5:10 points out, that we were reconciled to God and saved in Christ "while we were God's enemies." And "if God is for us, who can be against us? . . . Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? . . . No one" (Romans 8:31-34).

In the book of Isaiah, God is speaking to a worn-out, dis-

tressed people who need hope and encouragement. He wants to assure them of a change coming with the promised Messiah. This echoes an earlier image: "He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart" (Isaiah 40:11).

This shows what our nature must be toward anyone who is struggling in faith. Jesus had compassion for the weak and hurting. And if people had doubts and confusion, he gave assurance and encouragement. Compassion isn't a weakness. It's the power of grace that we too have received. So let's share the assurance of God's love!

Lord, empower us with your compassion and mercy—to share it with others. In the Savior's name we pray. Amen.

OUR GOOD SHEPHERD

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."
—John 10:11

When Jesus taught that he is the good shepherd, people had different reactions. Many said, "He is demon-possessed and raving mad." But others said that didn't make sense—and they asked, "Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"

The Bible's teachings and Jesus himself still get different reactions today. We understand that we may have to send soldiers into battle to protect our country, but people struggle with the idea that someone would have to die to pay for our sin.

Over the centuries, Christ's church has struggled with how to present the message that one person—Jesus—died to pay the price for human sin. The Canons of Dort say, "This death of God's Son is the only and entirely complete sacrifice and satisfaction for sins; it is of infinite value and worth, more

than sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world." This too gets different reactions.

Jesus himself taught that as the good shepherd, he was willing to lay down his life for us, the sheep that he loves. He was not like a hired hand, who would run away from danger, caring nothing for the sheep.

The good shepherd's death has "infinite value and worth" for all who believe in him and trust in his care.

How can you share Jesus' love and care today?

Jesus, thank you for being willing to die for us even though we deserve to die for our sin. Guide us to live in a way that brings honor to your gift of laying down your life for us. In your name, Amen.

OUR REJOICING

"Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them."
—Romans 4:8

Looking back to God's covenant with Abraham, Paul shows there is no reason for us to do any boasting. Believing and accepting God's gift is totally different from working for wages. Faith leads to righteousness, and this is credited to us as a gift. We could not possibly earn it or work for any part of it.

The Canons of Dort explain: "All who genuinely believe and are delivered and saved by Christ's death from their sins and from destruction receive this favor solely from God's grace—which God owes to no one—given to them in Christ from eternity." It's an eternal, divine plan.

As believers who are delivered and saved by Christ's death, we are blessed! As a hymn puts it beautifully, "Great is thy faithfulness, O God . . . blessings all mine, with ten thousand

beside!" God has had our best interests at heart from eternity. Because of Jesus' self-sacrificing love, we receive the gift of never having our sins count against us! Now, there's a reason for rejoicing!

Based on the truths of God's Word, the Canons of Dort help us understand God's gifts of grace and our reasons for rejoicing. How do you show your gratitude for God's gifts in Christ? What do you do to share your joy in all this with others?

Father in heaven, thank you for the joy of having our sins washed away forever. May our lives ring with rejoicing, inspiring others to believe in your breathtaking gift of salvation. Make us righteous in Jesus' name! Amen.

GOD'S ETERNAL PLAN

"Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt."
—John 12:15

Sometimes God's plan may seem rather plain, but at other times we wonder what he is trying to say or do.

Today is Palm Sunday, when we celebrate Christ's coming as King. On this day Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a young donkey, and we may well wonder what that is supposed to mean. So it's good to be reminded that God had a plan, whether we understand it or not. Writing about this event, John quotes an old prophecy (Zechariah 9:9) about a king coming on a donkey's colt—and this applies to Jesus. God definitely had a plan!

The Canons of Dort describe the Lord's planning and promise this way: "This plan, arising out of God's eternal love for the elect, from the beginning of the world to the present time has been powerfully carried out and will also be car-

ried out in the future, the gates of hell seeking vainly to prevail against it."

As Jesus rode in on a donkey, the crowd cried, "Hosanna!" calling for salvation. But not everyone there was happy. The religious leaders saw Jesus as a threat to their power, and they wanted to get rid of him.

As we celebrate Jesus, the one who came "in the name of the Lord," we must also remember that God calls us to respond with more than shouting, more than excitement. Our response to Christ's coming, dying, and rising again calls for a believing heart and living faithfully as God's children.

Lord Jesus, help us to celebrate your gifts by living faithfully for you, showing that we believe and trust in you as Savior. Amen.

JUSTIFIED

[Jesus] was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.
—Romans 4:25

Jesus was not caught by surprise. Riding a donkey into Jerusalem (John 12:12-15), he knew he would soon be arrested, sentenced, and executed, although he was innocent. And then he would rise to life again! Jesus had predicted all this to his disciples (Luke 18:31-33).

As we think about these things, let's remember that Jesus did all this for our salvation—so that we could be made right before God. Because of Jesus' death to pay the price of our sin, God credits us with Jesus' righteousness—making us justified—when we believe in his promise to save. In this way we become the spiritual descendants of Abraham, who believed “that God had the power to do what he had promised.”

Because he had such faith, Abraham is called “the father of all who believe” (Romans 4:11).

The Heidelberg Catechism (1563), approved by the Synod of Dort in 1619, describes faith this way: “True faith is not only a sure knowledge by which I hold as true all that God has revealed to us in Scripture; it is also a wholehearted trust, which the Holy Spirit creates in me by the gospel.”

This is the good news: God sent his only Son. He lived, was crucified and buried, and rose from the dead so that we too may live. Believe it, and be right with God. Believe it, and be credited with righteousness (justified). Believe it, and live as God's children today!

Gracious God, thank you for the gifts of righteousness and faith in Christ. We want to live as your children in this world. Empower us with your Spirit, in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."
—Matthew 16:16

Whoever we are, the main question for each of us is the one Jesus asks in this passage: "Who do *you* say I am?"

If we have faith in Christ as our Savior, our answer will be something like Peter's.

And, as Jesus told Peter, it is God who reveals this to us. The Spirit of God gives us the faith to believe. This is the gift to Abraham and to all who believe God's promises (Romans 4). As the Canons of Dort put it, God produces in us "both the will to believe and the belief itself."

What's more, when we believe, we receive, like Peter, the promise of a future with Christ. Jesus says he will build his church—that is, the body of all believers—and the powers of death and hell will not overcome it.

The main thing to remember here is that Jesus says, "I will

build *my* church. . . ." It's not ours or anyone else's. Jesus calls us to work with him by spreading the good news to all nations, discipling believers, baptizing them, and teaching them all he has commanded (Matthew 28:19-20). But we may never forget that it's *his* church that *he* is building.

The Canons of Dort say, "There is always a church of believers founded on Christ's blood," and this church "steadfastly loves . . . worships, and . . . praises him" forever as the Savior "who laid down his life for her on the cross." So let's love, praise, and worship our Lord in all we do!

Dear Jesus, thank you for making us your church. Keep building us to praise and honor you always. In your name, Amen.

CHRIST IN ME

I have been crucified with Christ. . . . The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.
—Galatians 2:20

Today's verses give a testimony of what it means to be a believer. Here Paul gets deeply personal about his relationship with Christ. He uses "I" several times to describe his own faith and trust in the Savior.

Paul explains earlier that he was once a severe legalist. He believed he could keep the law perfectly and be righteous before God, but that was impossible. There's no way we can ever make ourselves right with God. We are made righteous only through believing a promise—that Jesus' blood, shed on the cross, pays the whole debt of our sin. Jesus fulfilled all the requirements of the law for us, and he is the only One who could do that because he never broke the law. He was totally without sin.

So Paul learned, by grace, that he had to stop thinking he could

earn salvation by trying to keep the law. Instead, he said, he had to die to the law in order to live for God. And he identified so closely with Jesus that he testified, "I have been crucified with Christ"—as if his own body had been stretched on the cross. So now, said Paul, his old way of life was dead: "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." This is the good news! We are not our own but are grafted into him who lives in us (see John 15).

So let's join with the Canons of Dort again today by saying we are justified (made righteous) by faith in Christ alone! Can others see that Jesus is living in us?

God of grace, by your Spirit, fill us with new life in Christ so that we may live as believers grafted into him forever. Amen.

THE LOOK OF LOVE

The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him. . . . —Luke 22:61

Peter was one of Jesus' closest followers. A natural leader, Peter was a doer who often spoke up and motivated others when it was time to get things done. But sometimes Peter spoke when he should have kept quiet. Brave Peter promised loyalty and then didn't follow through. Earlier he said, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death" (Luke 22:33). But in the priest's courtyard he denied even knowing Jesus. Still, I think Peter deserves some credit for coming around and being there that night.

While this account tells of Peter's denial, it also shows the Savior's love. In all that Jesus did here—allowing himself to be arrested and mocked, healing a soldier's ear, and even looking Peter in the eye—we can see the heart of Jesus, who shows us his Father's heart.

When we get to know Jesus, we learn—often slowly—that his way of doing things is different from ours. It is not with swords or in trying to get even with people who have hurt us. Instead, it's the way of compassion and forgiveness.

The look and love of Jesus are a marvelous message! It was not a look of condemnation that melted Peter's heart. It was the loving look of a Father caring for his wayward child. It was an inviting look of grace, a look that brought remorse and repentance. It was the look of the redeeming, restoring love of God.

He's looking at us with that same redeeming love today!

Father, thank you for your look of love, and fill us today with the love you have shown in your Son. Amen.

ULTIMATE LOVE

"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."
—John 15:13

Jesus spoke these words to his disciples just a few hours before he was arrested. And the next day, which we celebrate today as Good Friday, he laid down his life for us all. He gave up his life willingly on the cross to pay the price for our sin.

Jesus clarifies his definition of ultimate love by adding, "You are my friends if you do what I command." And that command is "Love each other as I have loved you." Earlier that evening, as he ate his last supper with the disciples, Jesus had said the same thing, calling it a new command (John 13:34).

I sometimes wonder, "Do I have even a beginning of love like that? How does it show?"

Loving others by dying for them is not expected from each of us. But loving others by giving of our time and money and by sharing of our gifts and talents

is a start. There's more involved than being kind and patient. Love always trusts and always perseveres (see 1 Corinthians 13). In our gratitude for all that Jesus has done for us, we want to share his good news wherever we can. For as the Canons of Dort remind us, "God showed his love" by sending his only Son so "that we might live through him" (1 John 4:9).

We look to Jesus as our example. He went willingly and obediently. He laid down his life for his friends. Do you see Jesus as your friend?

Lord Jesus, thank you for giving your own life as a sacrifice for ours. May our responses of joy and gratitude show and tell others how we are your friends, to the Father's glory. Amen.

THE TEMPORARY TOMB

Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.
—John 19:42

When people get older, they think about arranging for a burial place or making funeral plans. After all, we are mortal, and our bodies break down and die.

Executed on a cross, Jesus had made no preparations for his burial, and most of his followers had scattered. Was his body simply to be dumped in a common grave for prisoners and debtors? The body of the Son of Man, who had “no place to lay his head” while he was alive (Luke 9:58), needed a tomb to borrow. This called for the help of Joseph and Nicodemus. Earlier these men were afraid to be known as Jesus’ followers, but now they came forward to give his body an honorable resting place. They used their connections with the governor, Pilate, to ask permission to take Jesus’ body for burial.

Pilate approved. After all, Jesus was dead and had to be bur-

ied. Joseph and Nicodemus had resources to prepare the body, and they had a place to bury it. So they wrapped Jesus’ body in linen and with burial spices and set it in Joseph’s own tomb nearby (see Matthew 27:57-60). They did all this quickly before sunset on Friday, because it was the “day of Preparation” for the weekly Sabbath on Saturday.

Imagine the fear and sadness of Jesus’ followers hiding behind closed doors that day. What a cheerless Sabbath!

But we know that tomb was just a temporary resting place. And by faith in Jesus, we know that’s true for us too!

God, thank you for the assurance that, like Jesus, we too will be raised. Lord Jesus, come quickly! Amen.

PEACE!

The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you!"
—John 20:20-21

Can we even imagine the disciples' state of mind? Many of Jesus' followers had scattered, and his closest disciples were hiding behind closed doors in fear of the religious authorities. Their Rabbi ("Teacher") had been crucified. They had believed in him as the Messiah (the "Anointed One"), their promised deliverer. Had it all been "too good to be true"?

Sure, they had heard Mary's message that Jesus had risen. Peter and John had run to see the now-empty tomb, but that wasn't the same as seeing Jesus alive. Was Mary mistaken? Had she imagined seeing Jesus in the garden? Had others taken the body? Good news can seem so unbelievable! Crucified and buried men don't walk out of graves! Were they being asked to believe the impossible?

Jesus didn't keep his disciples waiting long. That evening,

"Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!'" He stood, and he spoke. He showed them his wounds. He greeted them with a familiar blessing. Jesus gave them the peace and presence they had been missing. And they were overjoyed. Things had not been the way they were supposed to be, but now they were!

Today we too celebrate that God is with us! Christ has risen! He is alive, and he lives in us! Hallelujah! Peace is possible!

With whom can you share this good news today?

Resurrected Savior, as we rejoice in your victory over death, please inspire us to share the good news of peace and new life with God forevermore. In your powerful name, Amen!

KEEP SINGING!

In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.
—Romans 8:37

It seems to me that we often stop celebrating Christ's resurrection too soon. Yesterday, as we celebrated Easter, many of us sang, or even shouted, with excitement, "Up from the grave he arose, with a mighty triumph o'er his foes," and, "Christ the Lord is risen today! Alleluia!"

What are we excited about today? Does our worship on the first day of the week motivate us to live for the risen Lord in the other days of the week? Does it help us focus on what life is all about? How can we share this good news with the people around us today?

As we have seen earlier this month, the book of Romans includes lots of life-giving truths. It's also a letter in which Paul often breaks into a *doxology*—a hymn of praise to God. Our reading today from Romans 8 is an example. Paul piles reason upon reason for our re-

joicing: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" And "who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" No one! "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." And we remember this is all based on Christ's triumph over sin, death, and the grave for us.

Again, as the Canons of Dort say, "It is the promise of the gospel that whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish but have eternal life." So let's keep rejoicing this week, knowing that nothing can separate us from the love of God shown in the risen Jesus. We can keep singing today too! There are people who need to hear it.

Jesus, help us to rejoice each day in all you have done for us. We thank and praise you, Lord! Amen.

GOD'S DOING!

You also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. . . . You were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit. . . . —Ephesians 1:13

Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians with great praise to God for all the blessings we receive in Jesus. Back in eternity before he created the world, God worked out “the mystery of his will” with “all wisdom and understanding.” Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—three persons in one God working together—designed a way to include us humans in their family. Though we are imperfect and weak and even sinful, Christ came to give up his perfect life to pay the debt of our sin. And when we believe in him as Savior, we receive the Spirit of God himself to work in us as the guarantee of our inheritance with God forever.

One cannot read words like “the mystery of his will” without wondering, “Can we even begin to understand God’s will?” Books have been written in attempts to understand

the will of God. And when it comes to ideas like “predestined” and “adoption” into God’s family, we have to admit this is a mystery. We cannot comprehend it.

Still, we have the assurance of knowing we’re included—in Christ—having heard the message of truth, the gospel of salvation! We have received the Holy Spirit as a seal of our salvation. And with joy and delight we can see the work of the Spirit bearing fruit in us—“to the praise of his glory”!

Almighty God, we live in awe of the mystery of your will. Grant us the assurance of living in joyful obedience and delighting in your perfect purpose. Amen.

GLORY TO GOD!

"This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."
—John 15:8

There's an old song with the words "Do you know, O Christian, you're a sermon in shoes?" These words have stuck with me as a powerful illustration for life. Throughout my years as a pastor, I worked diligently to deliver sermons that help people hear God's Word, but what about showing myself to *be* a sermon?

When Jesus taught, "I am the true vine," he made clear that all the work of fruitbearing was to the glory of God, his Father. As Jesus' followers, we're called to bear fruit for God's glory also. This means showing that we are Jesus' followers, connected to him by the promised Holy Spirit. And by the power of the Spirit working in us, we will "bear much fruit." This fruit takes shape in a variety of ways, always motivated by our love for our Lord.

Many of us cannot tell an apple tree from a pear tree, but we can taste the difference in their fruit. The fruit that shows we are Jesus' disciples also assures us of our relationship with God. The Canons of Dort describe this fruit as faith in Christ, humble love for God, sorrow for sin, hunger and thirst for righteousness, wonder and praise at the depths of God's mercy, and more (see also 1 Corinthians 13; Galatians 5:22-23).

Bearing fruit, by the power of the Spirit working in us, we are assured of God's love and can bring him glory.

Jesus, empower us with your Spirit so that we will always bear fruit for God's glory. In your name we pray. Amen.

THE HOLY SPIRIT—A HEART CHANGER

"I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."
—Ezekiel 36:27

Hundreds of years before Jesus' birth, God's prophet Ezekiel addressed the exiles of Israel with promises of change and improvement. The Lord would replace their hearts of stone with hearts of flesh. The giving of God's Spirit would move the people to live obediently, careful to do things God's way. The gift of God's Spirit would lead to repentance.

Four hundred years ago, church leaders gathered at the Synod of Dort to describe the Holy Spirit's work in our conversion, from being dead in sin to being alive in Christ. Their words echo the passage we have read in Ezekiel today. "The regenerating Spirit," they wrote, ". . . penetrates into the inmost being, opens the closed heart, softens the hard heart. . . . God activates and strengthens the will so that, like a good tree, it may be enabled

to produce the fruits of good deeds."

The Spirit of God helps people to discern and understand the truth of the good news of salvation. The closed, hardened heart of stone becomes a heart of flesh. And even though "in this life believers cannot fully understand the way this work occurs," we can be assured that by God's grace we do believe with our hearts and love our Savior.

Is God's promise alive and well in your heart?

Lord, thank you for the gift of your Holy Spirit, guiding us to follow your ways, to your praise and glory. In the name of Christ, our Savior, we pray. Amen.

GROWING TO KNOW OUR LORD

His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.
—2 Peter 1:3

In this letter we hear the voice of Peter, restored to being “a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ.” (See April 18.) Peter states plainly that he has received a precious faith. And it’s not just his; others enjoy it too. He adds a greeting of “grace and peace” that comes only “through the knowledge of God and of Jesus.” This is the result of God’s Spirit at work, and Peter knows it.

The Canons of Dort explain that rebirth and restoration to life in Christ are entirely God’s work. Though our will may be spiritually dead and lost in sin, the Spirit of God “revives, heals, reforms, and—in a manner at once pleasing and powerful—bends it back.” As a result, we want to grow in obedience to God rather than resisting God’s will.

Noting that God “has given us everything we need for a godly life,” Peter urges his listeners to build on their faith with the spiritual fruit of goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, mutual friendship, and love. Of course, growing in all these qualities is possible only by the work of God’s Spirit in us, and in these ways we will continue to grow in knowing our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Our Lord wants us to know him and to grow to be like him fully. In what ways do you see the Spirit of God changing and regenerating you?

Spirit of God, thank you for working so powerfully in us to know Jesus. Help us to tell others all that you have done in our lives—to your glory! Amen.

WE CAN PERSEVERE

Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!
—Romans 7:25

In Romans 7, Paul talks about his own struggles with sin and the requirements of the law. But he is able to end on a joyful note. He exclaims, “Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Paul’s struggle is our struggle. Who would even begin to claim that they did not fall short? Who could claim to go a whole day without stumbling into one sin or another?

With Paul we can say honestly, “I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.”

The Canons of Dort assure us, “But God is faithful, mercifully strengthening” us in grace and “powerfully preserving [us] in it to the end.” And as Paul writes in Philippians 1:6, we can be

confident “that he who began a good work in [us] will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

God does not and will not fail. He has his world in his hands, and he has engraved us on his palms (Isaiah 49:16). This comforting assurance leads believers to shout, “Thanks be to God!”

Let’s make that claim today, in praise to our God, who has redeemed us and loves us with a love that will never die!

Author of salvation, we come with thanksgiving for the deliverance you have given us in Christ Jesus, our Lord. You are worthy of all praise, honor, and glory! In Jesus’ name, Amen.

TO BE FAITHFUL

God is faithful: he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.
—1 Corinthians 10:13

In our Bible reading for today, Paul gives examples from Israel's history to remind us to be faithful as God is faithful. These are grim warnings.

The people of Israel committed many sins, despite their privileged position as God's people. Does the church today need similar reminders? It certainly is easy for us to sin. Ask yourself, "How often do I act as if I don't have God's love in me?"

Paul wrote a strong letter to the Corinthian church. We know about church challenges and marriage struggles because of the people's failure to live in harmony (chap. 1, 3, 7). We learn about observing the Lord's Supper because it was misused (chap. 10, 11). Paul also deals with sexual sin (chap. 5, 6) and with problems that came up in worship (chap. 11, 14). But we also find inspiring teaching on spiritual gifts in the body of

Christ (chap. 12) and a beautiful picture of Christian love (chap. 13). Truly a pastoral letter!

The Canons of Dort echo the Bible's teaching. We know that we often fail. But through his Spirit, our forever faithful God reassures us that in his strength we will endure. We will persevere. He holds us safe.

Paul points out that we are not unique. Whatever might tempt us today has tempted people always. What's more, "God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear." And "when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it." Thanks be to God!

Faithful Father, thank you for your patience and love. Guide us to be faithful. In Christ we pray. Amen.

NEVER, NEVER!

"I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand."
—John 10:28

Jesus had his challengers! In today's reading we find people who refuse to believe he is the Christ, their Messiah. And he teaches them: "My sheep listen to my voice. I know them, and they follow me. . . . No one will snatch them out of my hand."

The Canons of Dort aim to assure us of this teaching too. "This teaching about the perseverance of true believers and saints, and about their assurance of it—a teaching which God has very richly revealed in the Word for the glory of his name and for the comfort of the godly, and which God impresses on the hearts of believers—is something which the flesh does not understand, Satan hates, the world ridicules, the ignorant and the hypocrites abuse, and the spirits of error attack." God's enemies will always be at odds with the truth of God's love and mercy for us.

The Canons go on to say that the church of Christ, "on the other hand, has always loved this teaching very tenderly and defended it steadfastly as a priceless treasure; and God, against whom no plan . . . and no strength can prevail, will ensure that the church will continue to do this. To this God alone, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be honor and glory forever. Amen."

We have the Messiah's promise. He will never lose us! Nothing and no one can snatch us from his hand. What assurance!

Lord Jesus, we praise you for holding us faithfully, now and forever! Help us to live faithfully for you each day, displaying your love to all. In your power, Amen.

A PASSIONATE PRAYER

"[Father,] my prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one." —John 17:15

On the night he was arrested, Jesus prayed this prayer to his Father, interceding for his disciples and all believers. This prayer is filled with compassion, revealing Christ's mission for himself and his followers.

Does he ask that we may never face hardships? No, he asks that we may persevere. It's a prayer for unity among believers so that others will believe. It's a prayer of deep love, asking that all people may grow to believe in him.

Reflecting on this prayer of Jesus, we can see that as believers we have a mission—and we will accomplish it only by remaining in him who is the vine (John 15:5). The Bible's message is designed to draw us into relationship with our Creator, who has revealed himself in his Son, Jesus Christ, and by his Holy Spirit.

It is appropriate that we close this month of lessons with this closing prayer of the Canons of Dort: "May God's Son Jesus Christ, who sits at the right hand of God and gives gifts to humanity, sanctify us in the truth, lead to the truth those who err, silence the mouths of those who lay false accusations against sound teaching, and equip faithful ministers of God's Word with a spirit of wisdom and discretion, that all they say may be to the glory of God and the building up of their hearers. Amen."

Following Jesus' example, let's be faithful in prayer. May we love as God loves—and share his good news everywhere.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, guide us in truth so that we may walk with you now and forever. Amen.

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