

A serene winter scene featuring a snow-covered path that leads into a dense forest of evergreen trees. The trees are heavily laden with snow, and the sky above is a deep, dark blue, speckled with numerous small, bright white stars, suggesting a clear night. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and quiet.

Jan/Feb 2023

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

**FILLED WITH THE
FULLNESS OF GOD**

ALSO: THE VOICE OF WISDOM

Friends:

Jesus tells us in John 10:10 that he came so that we “may have life, and have it to the full.” What does full life with Jesus mean? How can we live that out on a daily basis? This month, Pastor Beth Fellingner will explore that topic with us. We’ll find—through Scripture, stories, and anecdotes—that Jesus is inviting us into a deeper relationship with him. In addition, we’ll be challenged to share God’s love with others as a way to be “Filled with the Fullness of God.”



Then, in February, we’ll listen to the wisdom that the book of Proverbs offers to us. Pastor Jenna Fabiano has done a wonderful job providing clear connections between Proverbs and the teachings of the New Testament. Together we’ll find that the Bible and the Holy Spirit work in tandem to open our hearts to “The Voice of Wisdom.”

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

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Kurt Selles

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**"Filled with the Fullness
of God"**
Beth Fellinginger



"The Voice of Wisdom"
Jenna Fabiano

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january

Filled with the Fullness of God

Beth Fellingner

Ephesians 3:16-21 is an amazing passage that helps us glimpse what it means to live into the fullness of God. So this month we are going to look into a number of passages from Ephesians and from other books of the Bible to reflect on the full life God offers. Through stories and observations, we'll see some examples of how God gives his children what they need in their everyday lives. Each person has the ability to step into an experience with God that far surpasses just knowing about him. May these devotions give you an appetite to do that and to be filled with God's overflowing love each day.

Pastor Beth Fellingner is a wife, mother, and grandmother who has more than 40 years of experience in pastoral ministry. She and her husband, Barry, have created a missional community in their neighborhood called the Ugly Couch Cafe. From serving coffee at a blue picnic table on their front lawn, to praying with neighbors, to hosting faith gatherings on a weekly basis, the Ugly Couch Cafe has grown—and nothing gives Beth greater joy than introducing people to Jesus.

MYSTERY

In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ. . . .
—Ephesians 3:4

My two oldest grandsons are quite capable of eating an adult-size meal at a fast-food restaurant, but when they are at McDonalds, something changes. There is a choice they have to make: Should they order an adult meal or the smaller, kids' "Happy Meal," with its mystery toy inside? The draw of the mystery toy usually wins out. I love watching them open—or, I should say, *tear into*—the package to discover the mystery inside. Their patience is definitely stretched.

The apostle Paul is introducing us to something like that in Ephesians. We are invited to open a mystery package and peer inside to discover what God is sharing with us. There is more for us to know, and the wonder and mystery being offered to all people points to a new season in the great story of God's love for the world.

God's plan includes everyone. God's inheritance is for all who believe.

In this letter we discover that we are adopted, chosen, and called to serve shoulder to shoulder with all other followers of Jesus. We discover what it means to be saved by grace, and we are no longer strangers to God's plan. As we reach in for more, we discover the joy of becoming fully alive in Christ.

Lord and God, thank you for the truths laid out in your Word and for the amazing mystery you have revealed to us in Christ. Help us discover that all who believe in Jesus as Savior are part of your family and your inheritance. In Jesus' name, Amen.

ATTITUDE POSTURE

For this reason I kneel before the Father. . . .

—Ephesians 3:14

A friend who is a chiropractor gave me some wonderful insight about attitude posture. He got it from an encounter with Dr. Plentz. Dr. Plentz said that when you stand in an upright position with your chest up and out, it not only improves your spinal-biomechanics and reduces stress on your disc joints, but it actually also improves your mood.

Picture an Olympic diver, in position and ready to dive. They are standing in the posture that directly reflects their mindset.

I think Paul is telling us something similar here in Ephesians. Our posture matters. It matters especially in our attitude of prayer. What is our mindset, and how are we positioned? Sometimes our posture in prayer may be about being on our knees, but even more important is the posture of

our heart. When we submit our heart and our will to God in faith, we begin to understand our position in Christ. We know we have gone from death to life and are now seated with Christ in heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6). This means we can walk in a way of life that pleases God. And because of that, we can stand firm against the evil one.

As we align our spiritual mindset with our posture in prayer, we are ready to dive into the possibilities of life-giving conversation with God.

God, thank you for the opportunity to be courageous as we bow to you in prayer, knowing that as we submit to you, we are stepping into all that you have for us. Amen.

CHOSEN

He predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will. . . . —Ephesians 1:5

My daughter and son-in-law are in the process of choosing a therapy dog for one of our grandsons. They have been discussing and studying about which breed is best and which size is right. During this time, their other son has been helping to walk the neighbor's dog to get a sense of how this addition to the family will work. The family is invested together to make a good choice.

Even more important is understanding that God has decided that he wants us to join his family. Does it inspire you that God has been pleased to create us for fellowship with him? God knew that through the sacrifice of Jesus we would become sons and daughters of God. His plan for our lives is to include us in his story. It wasn't enough that God created us and made us his imagebearers;

he also loves us and wants to live in relationship with us.

When our lives reflect the realization of all this, we display God's glory and his love, and something changes in us. We carry ourselves with the knowledge that we belong and are part of God's family.

What does it mean to be part of this family? It means we are responsible for one another. Because of the love God has given us, we have the ability to live in unity together, sharing in the story that God has indeed chosen us.

Thank you, Father, that you have created us and have chosen us. Help us to see what it means to be in your family and to treat others with the same love you have shown us. Amen.

FULLY ALIVE

"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

—John 10:10

We stood on the beach in Trinidad seven days after a tsunami-like event had hit. It was now quiet, but we were advised not to go into the water yet. Nearby stood a number of food huts, known for their traditional "bake and shark" dishes. The huts had been covered in water just days earlier, but as they were drying out, many of the vendors were beginning to open the windows and doors again. We were fascinated by their resilience and sense of hope. Even though they had faced tough days, there would soon be a new season of customers and sunshine and busyness.

In a way, this reminded me of God's great promises for us. Even before we felt the breath of new life, when we were still separated from God because of our sin, Jesus, through his love for us, gave us the hope

of becoming fully alive. His sacrifice for us gives us the challenge of becoming fully alive in him.

To be fully alive is to be aware that the life God calls us to is dripping with meaning (even if it doesn't always feel that way). And we are called to work at living out that meaning in a deeper way every day.

Dear God, help us not to live sterile lives but to be useful in your kingdom. Help us to blaze trails and shine forth with the light you have given us through your love. Help us to be fully alive in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PERSPECTIVE

He made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ. . . .

—Ephesians 1:9

Have you ever tried tobogganing and been disappointed when it didn't go smoothly? Maybe your sled didn't go far or the hill wasn't as steep as you thought it would be. Maybe you felt like giving up. But then maybe you got a new perspective and realized there might be other options. So you changed the sled, or lightened the load, or tried a different part of the hill. And soon you were gliding swiftly downhill with snow flying in your face. What fun!

Looking at our Scripture for today, we might think it sounds heavy and plodding, or complicated, or even all-too-familiar, and we might be tempted to give up on it. But what if we just need a new perspective and realize we should try it again? Jesus wants us to know how much he cares for us, and he wants to offer us something that is far more than we can imagine.

When we begin to understand how much he loves us and wants us in relationship with him, our perspective changes. We realize that life with him is not just a Sunday or church experience but an everyday adventure that takes us to new places in our faith. We begin to trust differently, to listen and discern differently, and ultimately to experience a new way to live each day. We begin to experience the fullness of God in our journey of faith.

Dear God, help us to change our perspective on how we view you, and help us to realize how much you love us. Fill us with your joy today, and may we be strengthened in how we live out our faith story. Amen.

FEELING AT HOME

I pray that . . . he may strengthen you . . . so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. —Ephesians 3:16-17

A mother and her two young children went to visit an older woman from their church. She greeted them warmly and invited them to sit at her table for refreshments. The children soon noticed a large jar of jelly beans at the center of the table. It was hard not to stare at the delightful treat when it was so close. The older woman smiled and said, “Would you like one?”

Immediately both children nodded, and the little girl reached in ever so politely and took one jelly bean—red, her favorite color. She seemed pleased until she saw her brother reach into the jar and grab a handful of jelly beans. Then she wished she had done the same.

In Ephesians the apostle Paul is asking us to imagine going deeper than the polite relationship we may tend to have with Jesus. Christ wants us to live

fully. He wants us to be able to settle in and feel at home in our relationship with him. He wants us to know how much he loves and cares for us—and that will change how we live out our faith each day. He wants us to be grounded in the truth of his love so that we are not afraid to access all the power and strength he has for us.

No matter what our circumstances are, Christ is always offering all of himself for us. Today is a good day to stretch our faith and our imagination to find all of the “flavors” Christ is offering.

Dear God, give me the strength and courage to do more than sit politely with you. Fill my heart with your life and power to glorify you. Amen.

BEYOND IMAGINATION

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine. . . .
—Ephesians 3:20

My grandson, who is eight years old (going on 40), and my mother, who is age 91, share an incredible bond of friendship that is quite wonderful and unique. Over the years as they have spent time together, they have excitedly planned fun things to do. One of these occasions was a trip to the circus. Charlie got his tickets at school and couldn't wait to get home to call and see if my mother was ready to go on their date. They arranged their limo ride (Grandpa), and with eyes wide with wonder they were thrilled to see the circus stars perform. The performance delivered more than they had imagined.

Ephesians aims to do the same and much more for us. Through Jesus, God has provided new life and amazing possibilities for us, and our Lord is able to do more than

we could ever imagine in our wildest dreams. He knows every detail of our lives, and he knows the best life for us to live.

Today is a good day to sit and imagine with Jesus. Start with a Bible story you know, or read one that is new to you, and imagine what it was like to be there. What did God do? And what were the people around you doing?

Now imagine what your story today could look like. Invite Jesus into your activities today and expect to have your imagination stretched.

Dear God, we are thankful that your ways and thoughts are bigger than ours. Invite us into your plans today and help us imagine what is possible. Amen.

PUTTING ON THE EQUIPMENT

Put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground. . . . —Ephesians 6:13

Over the years, I have purchased hockey equipment, soccer cleats, basketball shoes, baseball pants and hats, and more for my children growing up. I also learned that the longer they played a sport, the higher the costs of equipment went up. Our son outgrew his basketball shoes every six months as his feet continued to grow. Then, when he moved up from house league to competitive basketball, he asked for a new shoe that was popular but didn't have ankle support. Against our better judgment, we bought a pair and soon realized as we iced his ankle that it wasn't the best decision to buy those shoes. We should have bought the better equipment instead.

Paul taught that if Christians want to be equipped for spiritual warfare, they need the best equipment. To live into

the fullness of God in our lives, we need to understand each piece of equipment and how to use it.

When I look at the armor Paul describes, I realize I am looking at a picture of Jesus. Jesus is the truth (belt of truth), and he is our righteousness and our peace (breastplate and shoes). The reason we have faith is through his faithfulness to us (shield of faith). And he is our salvation as well as the living Word (helmet and sword).

If we are equipped with the full character and blessings of Christ, we have the full armor of God to help us stand.

Lord, help me to learn from you and to be like you so that the armor you provide will help me live into the fullness of faith in you. Amen.

THE CONSEQUENCES

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people. . . .

—Ephesians 1:18

My son-in-law wondered how we could spend so much on groceries. He compared our grocery bill as empty nesters to their grocery bill for a family of five, and he was puzzled. The next time they came to visit, I suggested that he watch the traffic flow of my grandchildren. Within minutes of arriving, the pantry door had been opened, and across the room the fridge door was also open. He smiled and shook his head.

I love that my grandkids feel at home and that they know how to access foods they want and enjoy. They know that they have that privilege at Grandma's house. And so do their parents as well as friends who show up.

As Paul prays for the Ephesians, he knows this is the kind of information they need. They

need spiritual knowledge and understanding as their hearts begin to fill with the great blessings Jesus has for them. When Jesus challenges his followers to join him in the work he is doing (John 14:12), he says they will do more than he has done as they learn how to access the power they are given.

The same power that raised Jesus from the dead is offered to us. We need to understand how incredibly great our inheritance is. We need to open Scripture and find the amazing riches that are ours to use, just as my grandkids know how to open the pantry door.

Lord, light up our hearts with your love and grace, that we may be filled with your fullness. Amen.

WONDER

I pray . . . that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.
—Ephesians 3:17-19

I was online with a group of women who have been my prayer partners for over 20 years. Weekly we meet on Zoom and bring each other up to speed on concerns and needs to be prayed for.

I was writing these devotions at that time, so I asked, “What does ‘the fullness of God’ mean to you?” As we pondered this together, we wondered what would change in our lives if we actually began each day by reminding ourselves that all of God’s resources and love and power are ours, regardless of what might unfold in our day. Would our foundation grow stronger and deeper, and would we respond to our world differently? Would we fall in love with Jesus at a new level of understanding, appreciating what his death and resurrection accomplished?

One person responded that as she was preparing to lead a Bible study, she needed to think about what she wanted to say in a prayer. She said that as she asked God to give her the words, she immediately knew what she needed to say, and she began to write it down. She said that at that moment she was clearly aware of the presence of God through the Holy Spirit.

I wonder if when we become aware of the presence of God, we are beginning to enjoy the fullness of relationship.

Dear God, when we pray to you, move us to invite you in and to ask that we can become more aware of your nearness to us. Fill us today with your Spirit. Amen.

GROUNDED

Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit . . . giving thanks to God the Father . . . in the name of . . . Jesus. . . . —Ephesians 5:18-20

My niece's family has faced serious trauma this year. Her husband passed away suddenly, leaving her with three young girls to care for. Six weeks later, her nine-year-old daughter was diagnosed with cancer, had surgery to remove it, and went through four months of chemotherapy. Then a few months later a second tumor was found. As I write this, she is in surgery to have it removed. As we wait for answers and as hundreds of people surround them with prayer and encouragement, we entrust them to the fullness of God's love and care.

And in the midst of this battle, I hear praise and worship from family members and others who surround them. This is similar to the praise and worship that Paul and Silas engaged in while sitting in a prison in Philippi. They had

been beaten and jailed but did not give up. Their relationship and trust in God led them to share from the depths of God's goodness and love even in the hardest of circumstances.

Are you ready to share about the love and goodness of God, whatever life's challenges may be? Are you ready to live into the plans God has for you? May you be filled with the fullness of God regardless of your circumstances.

Lord, we may not like or understand the circumstances we are in, but please give us the strength to trust and honor you with our actions amid the challenges we face each day. In Jesus, Amen.

GOD'S PROMISE

"Then you will know that I am . . . the LORD your God, and that there is no other. . . ."
—Joel 2:27

Sometimes God gives us clear signs of his work and presence in our lives. I often call them thin slices of heaven. They remind me of a breeze that suddenly blows through an open window and brings refreshment. There are times in our lives when God opens a window and gives encouragement, confirming exactly who he is.

Years ago, as part of a Mothers Who Care group, I prayed with other moms for the students and teachers in the school my kids attended. Though our family moved to another location later, I knew we had planted seeds and could trust God with the results.

Then, in another city 15 years later, as I worked in an outreach ministry at a local church, I met two of those former students in my group. Both had now started a relationship with Jesus. Both recognized me

from the moms group from years earlier. We had prayed and expected Jesus to do great things, and he had worked in the lives of these young people. They embraced the love Jesus offered and were passing it along to others. As we embrace what God gives us and use it to bring the kingdom of God near to others, our lives also change.

In what ways has God presented you a thin slice of heaven and shown that he is God?

Thank you, God, for reminding us again that you are the Lord and you do great things. Help us to use the gifts you give us to share your love with others. In your name, Amen.

LIGHT SWITCH

This light within you produces only what is good and right and true.
—Ephesians 5:9 (NLT)

Many of us enjoy lots of freedoms in our everyday living. But sometimes we act as if we can do as we please. And we might even think we don't have to be accountable to anyone or anything. But that can bring all kinds of hurts to others as well as ourselves.

If we have faced hard times, we might also think that some people or some institutions owe us. Sometimes we can begin thinking that God owes us too. We figure that we have been good, or kind, or hard-working, or whatever, and that we deserve whatever we want. We think we can decide which rules apply and which ones don't.

Paul reminds us in Ephesians 5, however, that the sides are not even close to being even. Our very small contribution is nothing compared to Jesus' sacrifice for us. We are encouraged to

take hold of the truth of that sacrifice and to adjust our attitude and actions.

Paul is reminding us that we are called to live in such a way that our lives will shine with the light of Christ. How we live is an expression of how much we understand all that God has offered us through his Son. The light of Christ in us is what produces what is good and right and true.

Maybe the question is, How much do we owe him?

God, thank you for all you have given us through Jesus. Help us to live in a way that pleases and honors you. May we glorify your name in all we do. Amen.

DIVERSITY TOGETHER

Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us.

—Ephesians 2:18 (NLT)

Over the past 12 years while I have been a pastor in a newly planted church, one story I have heard again and again has come from new members. People who did not grow up in a church or who were rejected or bullied by church people in the past shared that as they were invited into our space, it was the first time they felt they belonged and were not judged. They learned that there was a place for them. It was the reason they stayed.

I wonder how it felt for Gentiles, who had long been treated as outsiders, to be invited into God's story of good news for all peoples. Paul reminds them in Ephesians that they are vital members of God's family. God's story of reconciliation is amazing. Jesus' death on the cross for all sinners has broken down the hostility between all peoples. We

are all equal at the cross. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross gave us one body, not many. It is the place where we lay down our differences and pick up God's grace.

Too often in the church we have divided over what is comfortable for us rather than what God offers. Today is a good day to meet your neighbor or anyone who needs to know that the good-news story includes them.

God, thank you that we are no longer strangers but part of your family. Help us to be your one body together and to let the world know by our love for one another that we are connected to you. Amen.

STARS AND SIGHT

For to me, to live is Christ. . . .

—Philippians 1:21

My husband and I often sit outside at night, looking at the stars and picking out constellations. When the moon is bright, he brings out his telescope, which gives us a different, more detailed look at the moon. It also gives us a renewed appreciation for our Creator.

While Paul sat in prison writing to the Philippians, he knew he couldn't change his circumstances, but what really mattered was the way he looked at his situation. Paul looked at his life through the lens, the perspective, that Jesus had given him.

Paul challenged himself to consider how he could best be used. He could speak to the guards of the prison, sharing the good news of Jesus, and he knew that the way he lived out his faith would affect them.

Sometimes, of course, he longed to go and be with the Lord in heaven, but he was determined to live his life to better the lives of others. Both through his writing and his attitude to the people around him, Paul wanted to honor Christ. Paul saw his life as a win-win. To stay here on earth meant more churches planted, more Christians encouraged, and more people finding Jesus. And to die would mean full life and peace with the Lord in heaven. Paul wanted to glorify God, "whether by life or by death."

Lord, help us to see how we might best help others come to know you. Give us courage in the midst of our days to share your story. As we serve you, may we see our lives as a win-win, for your sake. Amen.

WHAT DID YOU GET?

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.
—Romans 15:13

How long do you keep Christmas decorations up after the holiday? How long do gifts stay under the tree before you use them or tuck them into a drawer? One year I bought my mom a nice nightgown that I knew she would like. But I was really confused when I learned that she didn't wear it. I asked her about it, and she said she was saving it for a special occasion. She said it was soft and comfortable and that she really liked it—so I assured her that it was good to use the gown and enjoy it right away.

As I think about what we have been given by God, I wonder if we do something similar. For example, Paul points out some wonderful gifts from God in the blessing we read here today, and I wonder if we hear those words about joy and peace and then just tuck that thought away for some special day.

God has gifted us with the ability to experience hope and peace through the power of the Holy Spirit. What's more, we are given the ability to share this with others. So this isn't just a gift to be treasured and kept hidden, or even shared only in the church. God is calling us to bring this good news to the world.

May you experience hope and joy today—and share it with others!

Dear God, forgive us when we only use or share the gifts you have given us on special occasions. Help us to enjoy your hope, peace, and joy every day so that we might share the good news everywhere. Amen.

PAINTING A PICTURE

Epaphras . . . sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.
—Colossians 4:12

In my office is a picture of Jesus that depicts him as a child in Joseph's carpenter shop. Joseph stands at his workbench while Jesus plays with a nail on the floor. As light shines in the window, the shadow cast over Jesus is in the shape of a cross. This painting continues to catch my attention whenever I walk into my office.

Colossians 1 paints a huge picture of Jesus. He is indeed the fullness of God. Jesus has the authority to rule because all creation has been made through him. Most importantly, though, Jesus is as close as the air we breathe, and he has made it possible for the Holy Spirit to live in us. God calls each of us his own. All this and more gives us reason to worship. And to give thanks. And to share.

Paul asks us in Colossians 4 not only to appreciate this news but also to use it as a springboard to pray for others. We do not pray in vain. We pray so that we may know God better, so that our faith may grow. We pray like Epaphras so that others may stand firm in the truth of the fullness of God.

Paul knows that standing on this foundation of truth is worth everything. What are you standing on today?

Spirit of God, live in us so that we may live with confidence and boldness and grow in faith. Help us to pray for others so that they too may experience full life in you. Amen.

EXPERIENCE

We . . . ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all . . . wisdom and understanding. . . . —Colossians 1:9

Is there a car or truck you would love to own but probably can't, for one reason or another? Some years ago, I thought it would be wonderful to have a Hummer H3. It wasn't practical or fuel efficient, of course, but I was intrigued by it. I talked about it a lot, saying that if I was independently wealthy and not creation conscious, I would probably own one. Whenever I saw an H3 on the road, I would dream.

Then one day a generous friend who owned a dealership treated me with a chance to drive an H3. He knew it had been a rough week for me, and when I came home that day an H3 sat in front of my house with a set of keys in it. He said, "No off-roading, but enjoy!" Wow! The experience was more than I had imagined. Parking was a little tricky, but just driving that vehicle was an

amazing experience. It was no longer just an academic look at an H3.

Paul wants us to realize that *knowing about God* is not the same as *experiencing God* and all of his fullness. This passage is a part of Scripture that I have prayed over my children and grandchildren. Like Paul, I want them to enjoy the full experience of all that God has given. God has offered each of us the chance to adventure with him, assuring us of the full life he has in store for us. Are you ready for a test drive?

Dear God, thank you for loving us so much that you offer us life full and free. Help us to trust you enough to live into far more than just knowing about you. Amen.

APPRENTICES

You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.
—2 Timothy 2:1

An old saying about mentoring and apprenticeships goes something like this: “I do, you watch; I do, you help; You do, I help; You do, I watch.”

Jesus trained his disciples in a way like this, and they passed along to others what they learned from him. An apprentice commits to learning from a master and then becomes experienced and able to teach others.

In our Scripture reading for today, Paul urges Timothy to remember his training and to pass it along to reliable people who can teach others. By his grace, God wants to be in relationship with us in Christ, to fill us with his Holy Spirit, and to show us how to live fully so that we share all this with others. God wants us to be his apprentices.

A powerful image in *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis illustrates this well. This un-

usual book is written from the perspective of a demon (or devil) who is attempting to explain God’s great plan for humankind: “One must face the fact that all the talk about [God’s] love for men, and His service being perfect freedom, is not (as one would gladly believe) mere propaganda, but an appalling truth. [God] really does want to fill the universe with a lot of loathsome little replicas of Himself—creatures whose life, on its miniature scale, will be qualitatively like His own . . . because their wills freely conform to His.”

Dear Jesus, thank you for modeling what it means to truly live. Make us the apprentices you need, that we may share with others the way to full life with you. Amen.

COME TO THE TABLE

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. —Psalm 23:5*

On our front lawn sits a turquoise picnic table. Behind it is a fence painted with a mural. When the weather turns warm, we use this table to invite our neighbors for coffee chats, street parties, and other fun events. During the winter, we decorate it with snow figures sitting at the table enjoying a meal. The picnic table is a sign of hospitality to our neighborhood. The invitation to come and be part of the gathering is intentional.

Psalm 23 is about intentional care and hospitality. It describes the important work of a faithful shepherd for his flock of sheep. Without a shepherd, the sheep would be hopelessly lost and afflicted by disease or predators. This psalm helps us see how the Lord is our shepherd and we are his sheep.

The mention of a table takes the relationship with God even

deeper. The Lord prepares a banquet for us. Our host makes sure that everything is taken care of. When we sit at the table, we acknowledge that we can trust our host to sustain us with all he has provided. Full plates give us all we need while God protects us from the enemies around us.

The picnic table at our home is intended to refresh people's spirits and give them a smile. May your heart be refreshed and encouraged as the Lord, your shepherd, prepares a table for you today.

Dear God, thank you for preparing a table for us. Thank you for refreshing us and giving us everything we need to live through the battles of this day. Amen.

FULLNESS OF JOY

You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

—Psalm 16:11

She was young and pregnant and out of options. When she arrived at the home for single moms, she was not thrilled and wanted to take on the world alone. Or at least that is what she said. Beneath the façade was someone who longed for a family, a house with a yard for kids to play in, and a husband who would love her. She wanted happiness. She wanted all that the movies told her was possible.

When that story wasn't working out the way she expected, she discovered something different. She learned that Jesus loved her and that his plan for her was different from what she had thought. She started to listen and change, and she discovered there was a difference between happiness and joy. She began to realize, as she let God lead her, that he was giving her joy. The Lord's steadfast

care and strength would get her through the days of being a single mom. It became the foundation that her new family would build on.

This is true for all of us. The more we head in the direction of faith with our eyes and heart open, asking God to guide us, the more we find joy in the Lord's steadfast care and strength. We find encouragement to live into our real life today and to set fairytale dreams aside.

Father, thank you for showing us the path of life and filling us with joy. Help us to pay attention and be teachable so that we can enjoy each day with you. Amen.

REFLECTION AND RESPONSE

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. . . .
—Proverbs 3:5

For years my husband and I have planned what we call a “\$15 million day”—although it might need to be adjusted for inflation. At the beginning of the day, we bank \$15 million in an imaginary account, and we set off on a day of reflection. We look back on the past several months, and we look forward. For some people, the beginning of a new year is something like that. We ask questions about what we might have done differently, and what we would like to do—especially if we actually had loads of money. We dream big and imagine far.

Then we also ask, If money is the only thing stopping us from our dreams, why is that? Is there something we need to adjust in our reflections? Are we trusting God with our plans? Have we even invited God into our planning? Have

we made room to ask what we are trusting God for and whether our dreams connect with the full life he promises us?

When we ask these kinds of questions, we realize that what God wants to share with us is enough. This means that even when things don’t make sense to us, we can rely on God’s promises. It also means we are not in this alone. God is always with us, and God is enough.

God, please help us to trust in you. Help us to stop trying to figure life out on our own and to ask you for help. Thank you for guiding our steps along the path to full life. Thank you for walking with us today. Amen.

HEY, GOD

Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice.
—Philippians 4:9

Many years ago I read an incredible book called *Hey God* by Frank Foglio. The back cover gives this description: “Mama Foglio, her cantankerous husband, and ten ram-bunctious kids were poor. In fact, they were so poor that the poor people called them poor. Then one day the Lord burst into their lives, in the form of another, equally poor, equally large and tumultuous Italian-American family that stormed into their home and evangelized them *mano a mano*.” The book shows how Mama Foglio began to understand the riches of her spiritual Father and to rely on them. It is a powerful witness of what happens when we hand our anxiety over to God and begin to pray.

There are times when anxiety or fear can be paralyzing, and even though we know that to be true, we still go down that

path. I love it that Paul, from a prison cell, reminds us to stay focused on the Lord and “rejoice always.” He reminds us that conversation with God is important. He reminds us that we are a witness to others when we learn to lean on God rather than our anxieties. He also reminds us to remind ourselves of what is true: God’s provision is always ours.

As we change our thinking, we remember that through Jesus we have full access to the Father, who hears all our requests and gives us all that we need. And we inherit his peace, which “transcends all understanding.”

Lord, we rejoice that you are always with us. Thank you for peace and for all the riches you give us. Amen.

WOW! GLORY TO GOD

It is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us. . . .
—2 Corinthians 1:21

I have a wooden “Christmas” tree that stays up all year in my living room. After the Christmas season, because it is a flat tree with shelves, it is my tree of wisdom, and on each shelf there is a sign with an inspiring, clever saying on it. For example, “Sing like no one is listening”; “Dance like no one is watching”; “Love like you have never been hurt before”; “Live like heaven begins tomorrow”; “We do second chances”; and “Today I need a little bit of coffee and a whole lot of Jesus.”

My favorite chair sits beside the tree, and when people enter my house, they usually notice the tree and comment on it. The signs remind me to smile or pray or appreciate something about our life, our story, and our family.

I am thankful that 2 Corinthians reminds us of who God is.

God’s promises are sealed with the “Yes” of his love for us in Jesus. God’s “Amen” (“So be it”) is to his glory. He has affirmed us as his own, and through the Holy Spirit he has given us full, new life. There is no waffling on God’s part. God’s “Yes” is always “Yes.”

Let this be a “Wow!” thought for your day. God is completing in you what he started.

Dear God, thank you for equipping us to stand firm. Thank you for working in us so that your glory can be seen. Thank you for the “Wow!” factors in your promises. Amen.

HEROES

Continue to live your lives in [Christ Jesus], rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.
—Colossians 2:6-7

At this time of year, the apple trees in our yard are barren and seemingly have no life in them. They stand frozen, offering little more than a bit of shelter for the birds that land on their branches. I think ahead to when the first pink blossoms will appear in spring—and the fruit that will follow. It's wonderful, though, that even as I pass judgment on the trees in winter, there is still life inside.

Maybe you have read (or heard of) the book by Brother Lawrence called *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Don't let the size of the book fool you. Though small in its number of pages, it is rich in wisdom.

Brother Lawrence, a friar who is one of my heroes, came to realize that wherever he was, it was a good place to connect with God, for God is everywhere. Because of God's

presence, even places where Lawrence had felt empty and worthless became rich with a sense of belonging. His place in the monastery where he lived was the kitchen. There he learned to cook meals, do dishes, and run errands with God. What seemed a lowly position to others became a retreat and a haven of relationship with God. The kitchen became Lawrence's sanctuary, where he worshiped in spirit and in truth.

Where is your sanctuary?

Dear God, remind us that you are with us everywhere and are worthy of our worship. Thank you for including us in your plans for the day. Amen.

“MINI ME”

You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.
—1 Thessalonians 1:6

My three-year-old granddaughter is full of life and joy. Every time she runs into our house or I walk into theirs, she shouts, “Grandma, my ‘mini me’!” She is thrilled as she shouts the good news. No one can miss it. I have often suggested that she might be my “mini me” (since she is a lot like me), but she insists that I am her “mini me.” We share mannerisms and a flare for shopping, and we both tend to be optimistic. We have serious discussions about life, giggle about nothing, and enjoy afternoon naps.

Paul commends the church at Thessalonica that they have stayed strong in faith by following his example and that of other leaders—and ultimately by following Jesus, despite the hardship and suffering in their life. They have set an example of how to serve and live by the Spirit with joy. They have

learned to access all the empowerment and energy they need in order to live through the Spirit.

Whoever we are, on any given day we are following someone or leading someone. Our challenge is to follow those who imitate Jesus and to lead those who need to know him.

Lord and God, help us to imitate you. May we live by the joy you have given us. May we be empowered by your Spirit. May someone see you in us today. Amen.

PRAISE HIS NAME

Who is like the LORD our God, the One who sits enthroned on high . . . ?
—Psalm 113:5

When I pray with people, I often like to give them words of encouragement in the form of a challenge. For example, I'll invite them to begin each morning with praise as the first activity of the day. Like the psalmist, they can shout a hallelujah to recognize who God is.

This psalm was often sung just before people took up the first cup of wine at the Passover meal. They were remembering the goodness and faithfulness of God to the people of Israel.

Saying "Praise the Lord" (Hebrew: "Hallelujah") is also the perfect way for us to start the day, remembering the goodness and faithfulness of God. It helps to set the tone for the day, and it puts our attitude in the right place. It also reminds us that God is bigger than our circumstances and that no one else is like the Lord our God.

We can also sing God's praises before going to sleep at the end of the day. When we praise someone, it means we know something significant about that person and what they have done. The more we experience the fullness of God in our lives, the easier our praise of God will be.

As we practice, morning and evening, to praise God's name, we are reminded that we have a heavenly Father and a friend who is always with us and provides everything we need.

Dear God, from the rising of the sun to its setting, may your name be praised. Help us to experience your love daily, and as we give you thanks, may we shout "Hallelujah!" Amen.

WATERED

This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit.
—1 John 4:13

A fun memory on my Facebook page includes videos of my grandsons watering the roses in our backyard. The boys have intent looks on their faces as they hold the hose carefully and walk along the line of rosebushes. They water the roses well and enjoy doing this, but then something changes as they realize that what they have in their hand is useful for more than just watering roses. That is usually when you hear a loud noise on the video because my husband is getting watered instead. And there is laughter and delight all around.

Reflecting on those moments, I realize there is space in the garden for nurturing and giving. The gift of life is all around. When we discover God's love for us and the gift of the Spirit he has given us, we can stop to reflect and be grateful. In that

moment we know God loves us. It is the moment we surrender to his leadership and call. It is the moment we discover we have more in our hands and hearts than we have imagined.

Today is a day to turn what we know into action. Today is a day to join God where he is and to share his love and grace with others. Today is a day to bring delight and joy to God and others as we make use of the gifts and resources we have been given.

Father, thank you for giving us your Spirit. Thank you for nourishing us and calling us to live each day in your presence and love. Help us to use the gifts you have given, sharing with others as we answer your call. Amen.

PRESENCE

"Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel among you."
—Isaiah 12:6

It was a cold and sunny day in January—perfect for sledding down icy hills. Our church community gathered for a fun afternoon on the slopes and planned to meet afterward at the church for chili and hot chocolate.

Unfortunately, our 11-year-old son decided to go off a ramp with his racer, and he flew off the sled as it proceeded down the hill. He, on the other hand, came to an abrupt stop, face-planted on the hard ground. He lay there longer than he should have, and when others went over to help, they found he had lost feeling below his chest.

After he was brought by ambulance to the hospital with a diagnosis of a broken neck, the mood of the day changed. We spent hours waiting through X-rays and tests and talk of sur-

gery. A prayer chain started up across the city.

After six hours the doctors were baffled and were ready to start the tests over again. At that moment, our son declared that he would play ball again. He was an avid basketball player. When we asked how he knew, he said he could feel God present with him and healing him.

As he walked out of the hospital that night, the doctors could only attribute his recovery to a miracle. We agreed.

Dear God, thank you for the moments when you show your presence to us. May we always look for your hand to care for us, even doing the unexpected. Amen.

TIME SPENT

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

This passage of Scripture gives us a moment to think about using our time well.

Have you figured out the best way to use your time?

Lots of books, articles, podcasts, and videos have been produced to share the latest and greatest tips on how best to use the time we have in our lives. Some of the ideas are great for building relationships, caring for others, getting an education, working efficiently, and even planning for retirement. As we grow older, many of us realize that we have wasted some time along the way, and we may have regrets about that.

We cannot gain back the hours we have spent, but, in the power of God's Spirit, as we seek to change how we live, we can make the most of the time ahead of us. How we

spend our time—with God and with others—matters.

How are we spending our time each day? There's a cartoon that quips, "We only live once," and the comeback line says, "We only die once; we live every day." What matters is how we live every day.

Will our lives reflect the majesty of Jesus, or lost time? Paul urges us, "Don't waste the time that you have." Aim to live with no regrets. Live fully with the life you have been given in Christ.

Dear God, forgive us for the times that we have spent ignoring you and selfishly focusing on what is not important. Help us to use our time wisely, honoring you. Thank you for your grace. Amen.

BE KIND

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

In a world that has felt upside down for a while, it has become easy to get grumpy and less patient with others. Feelings of bitterness and unforgiveness have marked people's behaviors, and when we read the news, we shake our heads wondering.

The words of Paul in Ephesians 4 strike a chord with us. He knew and experienced the same kinds of behaviors in the early church. His words challenge us to live fully into who God has called us to be. God has given us every gift through Jesus so that we can walk in a manner worthy of our calling. As Paul instructs us in this chapter to be tenderhearted, forgiving, and kind, he emphasizes that we must keep on living this way.

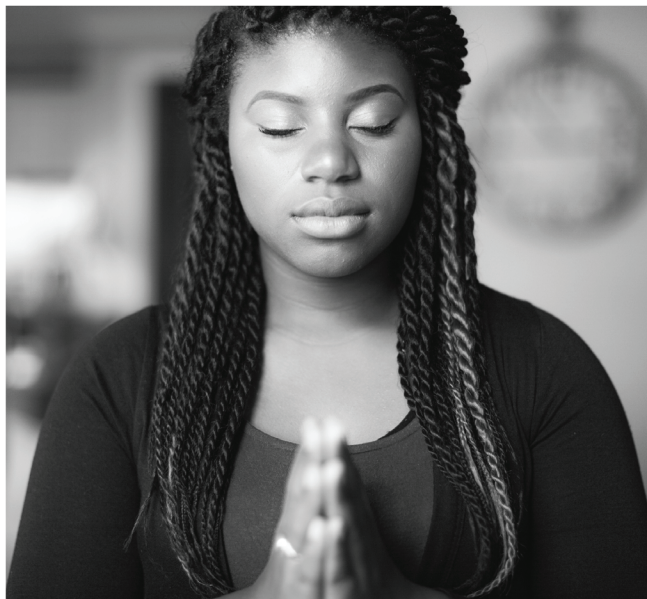
Kindness and compassion go hand in hand. We are called to be aware of others around

us and how we might encourage and help. Think of all the good we can do if we simply imagine, "How can I add value to someone else's life today?" It's about relationships, and our relationship with God is the most important one in life.

As we imitate Christ, we learn that *kindness is not optional* for believers. It is a call to obedience. When we live fully in kindness to one another, we are saying thank-you to God.

Dear God, thank you for your example in how you have treated us with great mercy and kindness. Help us to model your gracious kindness to others. Forgive us when we fall short, and remind us to try again. Amen.

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