

Today

July/Aug 2019

refresh, refocus, renew

EYES OPEN
TO GOD



ALSO: EARTHLY TREASURES, HEAVENLY TREASURE

Friends:

How are your eyes? A few years ago, I underwent a series of surgeries on my eyes that left me partially blind for many months. At one point, I went on a seaside tour with my family, and while they marveled at majestic landscapes, ships on the horizon, and birds in the air, I could barely see my feet. The experience left me with a deep sense of how precious and fragile our physical eyesight truly is.



The Bible calls us to cultivate spiritual eyes to see God at work in our lives. While we are created to know God and enjoy him forever, our own sinfulness pushes us to close our eyes so that we ignore God as if we didn't need him. Our human nature today is no different from the way it was in biblical times. Against our own best interests, we would rather wander blindly instead of following God.

In July, Arie Leder leads us through stories from the book of Judges, showing how even God's chosen people, who should have seen him best, often turned away from God's leading. Like them, we have to admit that we would rather do what seems right in our own eyes.

Then in August, George Young explores the concept of wealth with the theme "Earthly Treasures, Heavenly Treasure." God's creation is full of rich gifts for us to enjoy to his glory, but none of those compares to his wondrous gift of salvation.

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

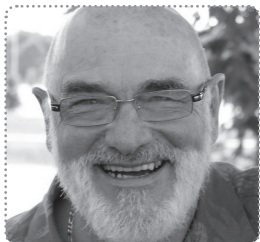
A handwritten signature in dark ink, which appears to read "Steven Koster". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping "S" at the beginning.

—Steven Koster

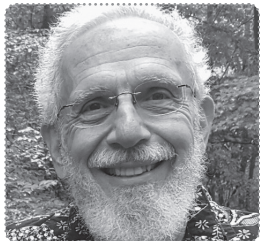
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"Eyes Open to God"
Arie C. Leder



**"Earthly Treasures,
Heavenly Treasure"**
George R. Young

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ReFrame
Media

Eyes Open to God

Arie C. Leder

july

The book of Judges describes a people of God we'd rather not see. With our eyes open to the teaching of Judges, we see the truth about God's people, including ourselves—for we often abandon our Lord in favor of this world's attractions. With eyes open to the truth, we can also see God's endless patience with an undeserving people and our need to be saved from ourselves. Above all, eyes open to God help us see that we are not our own, "but belong—body and soul, in life and in death"—to our patient, merciful Judge and Redeemer, Jesus Christ (see Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 1).

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Earthly Treasures, Heavenly Treasure

august

George R. Young

Jesus likened salvation to a treasure, and this helps us understand our eternal salvation and how to live as Jesus' followers. In the month of August let's reflect together on the many blessings we have here on earth, giving God thanks for all good things and pondering how God calls us to use his blessings for good and for others—with eyes open to the coming of his kingdom. As a hymn suggests: "May the mind of Christ, my Savior, live in me from day to day, by his love and power controlling all I do and say."

George Young is a retired missionary to Japan who is now living in the northeastern United States, where he and his wife can be near their children and grandchildren.

HIDDEN TREASURE

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field."

—Matthew 13:44

Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* is a story about pirate gold, stolen from Spanish sailors, who had stolen it from the Incas in South America, who had invaded the lands of other people and had built an empire in the Andes Mountains. The pirates had buried the gold on a Caribbean island. After the treasure map was lost and later found, people from England went in search of it. This is a tale of mutiny, bloodshed, and—in the end—untold riches. It is a parable about people's ill-gotten gains and the trouble it brings.

In Jesus' parable about hidden treasure, our Lord doesn't focus on where the treasure came from, who might have known about it in the past, and so on. That isn't why he told the parable. The important points here are that (1) the kingdom of heaven is a

treasure worth more than anything else we could have, and (2) sometimes people stumble upon it unexpectedly.

How easy it is to be utterly wrapped up in the struggles of life: getting an education, landing a job, finding a spouse, raising kids, fending off health problems, growing old, and, eventually, facing death. How easy it would be to brush off eternal life as vague religious stuff, and to listen to the sneers of people who call it "pie in the sky." But what a surprise to find that Jesus came to show God's love for us sinners! Eternal life and the kingdom of heaven are as solid as treasure found in a field.

Lord, thank you for the surprise of your love for us, which makes all of life worthwhile. Amen.

DORCAS

In Joppa . . . a disciple named . . . Dorcas . . . was always doing good and helping the poor.
—Acts 9:36

Dorcas was often busy making clothing for others to wear. When she died, the local widows stood around Peter, “crying and showing him the robes and other clothing” that Dorcas had made for them. She obviously had taken to heart the Law of Moses that said, “If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them” (Leviticus 25:35).

That was in the days before social security and welfare. It’s good that there are some safety nets in society today to make sure that people who are poor don’t slip through the cracks unnoticed. But there are some downsides to the systems we have today—for example, people who have plenty of their own money are often not even aware of the poor. Many don’t know *any* poor people, and

the poor tend to sink into their own miserable neighborhoods, “out of sight, out of mind.” Some people who are well-off even say, “Let the government take care of them.”

The Bible’s teaching about poverty is hard to grasp if we have no heart to help the poor, and it’s hard to act upon if we are self-absorbed, paying no attention to folks who are struggling, or to people living in the poorer parts of town. Our churches can help with programs to feed the hungry and to give shelter and job training to the homeless. But it all starts with having a heart of love, like Dorcas.

Thank you, Lord, for the example of Dorcas. Move us to meet and know and care about the people around us, as you do. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.

WISDOM, KNOWLEDGE, AND HAPPINESS

To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness. . . .
—Ecclesiastes 2:26

As a boy, Charles Dickens knew poverty from bitter experience. He never forgot what he had learned. Many of his novels deal with the huge gap between wealth and poverty. Perhaps the most unforgettable is *A Christmas Carol*. Its main character, Ebenezer Scrooge, is a “grasping, clutching, covetous old sinner” who can squeeze blood out of a stone. Bob Cratchit, his underpaid bookkeeper, shivers in his unheated corner of the office. But Bob has learned to be content in his situation.

At the meager Cratchit-family Christmas dinner, Bob proposes a toast: “Merry Christmas to Mr. Scrooge, the founder of the feast!” Mrs. Cratchit objects with scornful words about Scrooge, but Bob, in all humility replies mildly, “My dear, it’s Christmas ... and the children!” For all his poverty, Cratchit has

wisdom and happiness. But Scrooge, for all his wealth, has a bleak and miserable life.

Here is something of the complexity and mystery about wealth and poverty. Most people think that wealth brings happiness. But that is not always so. Marxism claims that wealth always comes by oppressing the poor. But that is not always so. Happiness and contentment can exist in the midst of scarcity, and the poor can oppress each other. What’s more, the rich can be righteous, and they can be a blessing to the poor. Faith in God and living by his love are the keys to finding happiness.

Lord, give us the wisdom to examine our motives and actions without fooling ourselves. May we please you in all we do. In Jesus, Amen.

THE PROSPERITY OF JOB

The LORD blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the former part.
—Job 42:12

Not many years ago, Marxist/communist revolutionaries in Latin America tried to make the Bible support their own hatred of the wealthy. But the prosperity of Job (and other patriarchs in the Bible) was a rock on which their theories crashed and sank.

Satan tried to cast doubt on Job's motives, saying that Job was a faithful servant of God only because God made him prosperous. But God said there was "no one on earth like him ... blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil" (Job 1:8). And when God allowed Job to go through some tough times, God was proved right. Job remained faithful to God, no matter what terrible trials he had to endure.

In his misery, Job was visited by three friends who aimed to help him. But they ended up accusing him, saying that his

suffering had to be a result of some sin he had done. "Why else would God afflict a man?" they reasoned. But Job was not suffering because of some sin, as the book of Job makes clear. In some situations in this broken world, the mystery of suffering remains hidden in God's inscrutable plan. But we can trust him.

We may be blessed with wealth and prosperity or challenged with suffering and poverty. The main thing is to be faithful to God and share his love with others, whatever the circumstances. For God is faithful and keeps his promises.

We thank you, Lord, for all the good you give us. Help us to be faithful and to share your love and blessings with others. Amen.

THE RICH MAN AND THE POOR MAN

"There was a rich man who . . . lived in luxury every day. At his gate was . . . Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table." —Luke 16:19-21

Like the prophets who brought God's Word to the people, Jesus had sympathy for the poor and often rebuked rich people who were selfish and did nothing for the poor. In Jesus' parable, the poor man Lazarus who died was carried by angels to Abraham's side in heaven, and the rich man was sent to hell, where he was in torment.

The rich man had lived for his own pleasure and had ignored the message of Moses and the Prophets. Lazarus had had no comfort in life, but in death he received the blessings of life with God in heaven.

This parable was a comfort to many slaves in the American South in the 1800s. One of their spiritual songs speaks of God as the "Rock of my soul" in "the bosom of Abraham"—an expression referring to

"Abraham's side." Where could those slaves find justice when their children were ripped from their arms and sold down the river, when the earthly powers-that-be were stacked against them? But the Lord saw their plight. And he will bring justice to the oppressor.

In Jesus' parable, the rich man's sin was not that he was rich; it was that he refused to care for a person in need. His stony heart ignored the call to share food with the hungry and to provide shelter and clothing for people in need (Isaiah 58:7).

Lord, instill in us your heart of compassion, and lead us to do some good with the earthly treasures you have given us. In the name of the One who has compassion on us, Amen.

COME, FOLLOW ME

“Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

—Mark 10:21

Jesus' words here about selling everything raise a storm of static in our minds. It's hard to hear what he is saying. We wonder, “How can I live without a place to hang my hat, or a bed to sleep in, or shoes on my feet, or clothes on my back? Must I sell *everything*!?”

Frantically searching for some purpose to Jesus' command, we might remember his call to Simon and Andrew, James and John, who were all fishermen: “Come, follow me . . . and I will send you out to fish for people” (Mark 1:17). And “without delay,” they left their fishing nets and boats, their homes and families. In those days it was an honor to be called by such a teacher.

I remember when God called my family to leave the United States and go to Japan to share Jesus' message with others. We were on a budget to pack

a shipping container, and we were able to bring along the baby's high chair, some basic furniture, clothes, dishes, and other necessities. But we had to sell our home, to have a yard sale for treasured possessions that couldn't go with us. We had to trim down and travel light to follow this calling. And we had to entrust the care of our aging parents to our siblings. In the process, we gained many more brothers and sisters in Japan.

Whatever the cost, we must listen to Jesus and share his good news, wherever we are called.

Lord Jesus, sometimes your words shock us. But teach us what is important in life and lead us to follow you, whether in our own neighborhood or to the ends of the earth. In your name we pray. Amen.

HEAVENLY ECONOMICS

One person gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty.
—Proverbs 11:24

In this world, economics is often about quickly making the greatest profit at the expense of others. It's based mainly on greed and a "me first" attitude. Though it is sometimes called "the pursuit of happiness," it will never satisfy our deepest needs and longings.

There is also what we might call "heavenly economics." It gives free rein to generosity, love, and goodwill. It turns the selfish, vicious cycle of greed on its head, and flashes of heavenly sunshine beam through.

We can hear echoes of this in our proverb today. Generous people forgive debts, as they have been forgiven, and ripples of love spread outward. That's an example of amazing grace amid worldly economics, building up treasure in heaven.

Maybe you have seen the old movie *It's A Wonderful Life*. It's

a story about George Bailey, whose savings and loan business lends out money at low interest so that low-income people can buy a home. But then something goes wrong: one day George's uncle loses track of a bundle of money on the way to the bank, and that puts George in danger of going bankrupt. In the end, though, George is rescued by the townspeople, who give him all the cash he needs because he always treated them with goodwill.

Let's follow God's leading and live with generosity and goodwill. Greed and selfishness will only lead to ruin.

Lord, "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven . . . for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever." Amen.

MOTH, VERMIN, AND THIEVES

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in. . . . For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

—Matthew 6:19-21

Nothing is permanent in our earthly existence. Even the Himalayan mountains will erode. All treasures on earth will also pass away.

Keith and Kristyn Getty capture this truth in their song "My Worth Is Not in What I Own": "Fame, youth, and beauty hurry by, but life eternal calls to us at the cross." Even if moths don't make holes in your woolen coats, all the things we treasure here on earth will "hurry by," often passing away before we notice they are rusted, rotted, spoiled, or gone.

Nowadays it's popular to invest in bitcoins, a made-up currency that is not tied to any country's central bank. Wild fluctuations in bitcoin value mean that people can realize a 1,000 percent increase in their investments within a week. Or they can lose it all just as fast.

Jesus lived here before the blooming of capitalism and stock markets. But in those days there were merchants who invested in trade by ships and camel trains. All investments come with risks.

It's not that Jesus was against trade or investing or becoming wealthy. What matters, he says, is where your heart is. He taught that if we don't have our heart anchored in God's eternal kingdom, we will lose everything when we pass away from this earthly life.

Where is your treasure—and your heart?

Lord, you are our treasure; "you have been our dwelling place through all generations." Help us to find life forever in you. Amen.

GOD AND MONEY

"No one can serve two masters. . . . You cannot serve both God and money."
—Matthew 6:24

Maybe you have heard that the Roman god of love was Venus, and the god of war was Mars. To many of us, those are just the names of a couple of planets. But to a Roman army, it was crucial to sacrifice to Mars and pray for victory before going into battle. And a young Roman man would pray to Venus that the woman who had stolen his heart would return his love.

Our historical memory is short, and most of us don't know that the ancient Syrian god of wealth and prosperity was called Mammon. Jesus lived just across the border from Syria, and he knew about Mammon. This was a false god that represented the love of money and the material wealth and comforts and power it might buy. Jesus also knew that you cannot have any other god alongside the Creator of heaven and earth. That would

be idolatry. Therefore, he said, "You cannot serve both God and Mammon."

Idolatry always involves a different way of looking at the world and doing business. And gradually the idol takes over. Greed and worry—accompanying so much of the pursuit of prosperity today—replace the moral guidelines of the Bible, and calm trust in God's blessing disappears along with them. Trampled human relationships and nervous breakdowns are sometimes signs that, somewhere along the line, serving Mammon has squeezed out serving God.

Who are you serving today?

Lord God, earning a living is an important part of our daily life. Help us to serve you alone, and to trust you for our daily bread. Amen.

CONTENTMENT

Godliness with contentment is great gain.

—1 Timothy 6:6

In a surprising program on HGTV, people go looking for tiny homes. They don't want an enormous monthly mortgage payment, and they don't want to accumulate all kinds of unnecessary junk in their lives. So they look at 200-square-foot homes instead of 2,000 square-footers. Some of these have a master bedroom you crawl into under the rafters, a children's bedroom under the other end of the roof, and a kitchen, dining room, bath, and living room cleverly squeezed into one small area. Sometimes the biggest question is "Do we really need a bathtub? A shower takes up less space."

In old Japan, a farmer's futon was folded and stored in a closet each morning. Presto! The bedroom became a living room!

"If we have food and clothing," says Paul, "we will be content

with that." Of course, if we live in northern Canada, we might need a place to get in out of the icy blasts. But Paul's point is well-taken. Materialism sets all kinds of traps and temptations that can lead us astray from the path of faith.

The tenth commandment—*Do not covet* (Exodus 20:17)—points the way to contentment. If we always have a roving eye, hankering for our neighbor's house, car, or spouse, there will be no end to feeling unsettled. But with the Holy Spirit living in our hearts, filling the void that would otherwise drive us to distraction, we have peace and contentment within.

Lord, we do not want to follow one fad after another; we want to follow Jesus in contentment. Lead us, we pray. Amen.

ANOTHER COMMAND

Command those who are rich . . . to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. —1 Timothy 6:17-18

In our church each Sunday we read a bit of Scripture that teaches us God's will for daily living—like the Ten Commandments. This is a helpful exercise.

When we come to have faith in Jesus for salvation, we do not keep on living as if we are unbelievers. When we are born again by the work of God in us, we will change and want to live God's way. But we can be stubborn and willful, because our old nature still clings to us. We often need to be reminded to do good, to love others, to share, and to be Christlike in all we do and say. So it's important to meet together for worship and fellowship and to hear God's commands again and again.

When the apostle Paul wrote to Timothy in the letter we have read from today, Timothy was leading a newly planted

church in Ephesus. Among other things, Paul told Timothy to command rich believers "to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share."

In the church there were well-to-do people, and there were poor people—and this sometimes caused friction. The rich had to be reminded to share with others and not to look down on the poor, and the poor had to be reminded not to covet. Everyone, in fact, needed to remember not to pin their hopes on money or wealth but to put their hope in God, who provides all we truly need. In this way, Paul said (echoing Jesus), we lay up treasure for eternity, taking hold "of the life that is truly life."

Lord, help us to be generous and content, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

AN INHERITANCE

A good person leaves an inheritance for their children's children.

—Proverbs 13:22

Lawyers are often needed to ensure that a large inheritance is divided properly—as stated in a legal will. Without that framework, the people in some families would tear each other apart over the money or things they expect to get as their entitlement.

Inheritance issues *can* be controversial, but, in the Bible, inheritance is also a great example of a good gift: it's given by grace—not earned—a windfall received from God, who loves us. Psalm 136 celebrates the way God gave the promised land to Israel “as an inheritance.” Again and again the refrain echoes, “His love endures forever.” As history shows, Israel had done nothing to earn that inheritance. God was creating a new nation that would bless all nations by providing a Savior.

The tribe of Levi, though, did not receive land as their in-

heritance. They served in the ceremonial worship of God as priests and teachers and temple workers. And because of this intimate relationship with God, it was said, “The LORD is their inheritance” (Deuteronomy 10:9).

In the New Testament, Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5). And 1 Peter 1:4 describes salvation as “an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.”

What a heavenly treasure we have in Christ! All by grace, through faith!

Thank you, O God, that you are our inheritance, and that to know you, and the Son whom you sent, is eternal life, greater than all earthly treasure! Amen!

WE ARE GOD'S INHERITANCE!

The LORD took you and brought you . . . out of Egypt, to be the people of his inheritance, as you now are. —Deuteronomy 4:20

We can understand how God is our inheritance, because when we receive Christ, we become the beneficiaries of his great love. That, in itself, is amazing grace!

But for the Bible to say that *we are God's inheritance*—that is almost beyond belief! God, who owns everything in the universe, is thrilled that we are his possession! Deuteronomy 32:9 repeats this incredible truth: “The Lord’s portion is his people, Jacob his allotted inheritance.”

Deuteronomy 32:10 describes how precious Israel was to God: “In a desert land he found him, in a barren and howling waste. He shielded him and cared for him; he guarded him as *the apple of his eye*.” This phrase literally means “the little man of his eye,” referring to the pupil in someone’s eye, in which you can see your reflection.

In Isaiah 5 God sings a love song about his people: “I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. .. The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in.” This provides a rich background for another verse: “For God so loved the world . . .” (John 3:16).

The Lord’s inheritance is not simply gold and silver but the people whom he loves and has redeemed in Christ, and God delights in gathering us around him to celebrate all the goodness of full life!

How wonderful is your love, O God, how deep beyond fathoming! Thank you for making us your delight. In Jesus, Amen.

FOOLISH PRIORITIES

"Fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" —Luke 12:20

Many people fear cancer. It has been called the scourge of our times. If you received a diagnosis of cancer today, would it shake your world? Would the shadow of death be enough to make you reexamine your life's priorities? Would it be a wake-up call?

God does not mince words with us. In Jesus' parable of the rich fool, God speaks harshly to a busy farmer who has had a bumper crop. Savvy businessman that he was, the farmer made plans to build bigger barns, store his surplus grain, and take life easy from then on. His mind raced a hundred miles an hour, but he had no thought for God.

The Bible says, "The Lord ... is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). This means we receive lots of opportunities

to turn from our selfish ways and to follow God's way—the way to real, full life. God often nudges us and speaks with a gentle, insistent voice—but sometimes he also thunders. He calls us to repent and reorder our lives, to make him first in our lives—above success, even above family.

And there will be a day of reckoning, as Jesus points out in his parable. So let's listen to God, urging us to follow the way of real, full life.

In your life, what kinds of priorities might need changing? Which way is God nudging you?

Teach us to number our days, O God, that through Jesus we may gain a heart of wisdom. Amen.

RAGS OR RICHES?

Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat, for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags.
—Proverbs 23:20-21

Proverbs 23 offers wise advice: Be careful of chasing after riches, for they are soon gone. Be wary of eating too many delicacies and drinking too much wine. Not only will they make you sick; they will also trap you and drag you into folly. Beware of joining in with revelers and adulterers; the pleasures of sex and partying will only deceive you and ruin you in the end.

Today, thousands of years later, the temptations of easy money, strong drink, sex, and gluttony remain powerful. And the results are the same as ever: ruined relationships, a life in shambles, addiction, and poverty.

Proverbs urges young people to listen to the warnings of their parents, to get wisdom and discipline—or they may end up stumbling through the

streets, begging for a handout among cars stopped at a traffic light.

If for some reason you have fallen into trouble in life, it's not too late to turn around. God loves you, and his forgiveness is available for the asking.

"Be zealous for the fear of the LORD," and there will be "a future hope for you." If your heart is anchored in God's love, "your hope will not be cut off." You may not end up rich here on earth, but you won't be reduced to rags.

The riches of the good news of God's salvation last forever!

Without you, Lord, we are like a sinking ship, flashing out an SOS signal: "Save Our Souls." Through Christ we ask you to save and renew us. Amen.

FROM MIRY DEPTHS TO GLORY

Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.

—Psalm 69:1

Yesterday we considered the plight of sinking to the depths of a destructive, ruinous life. Today we look at a psalm in which the writer calls out to God for help, seeking salvation.

Psalm 69 was written by King David of Israel in a time of accusation and conspiracy. We don't know many details, but apparently the scandal was about a sin he did not commit.

Reading this psalm today, we can also see that it points to Jesus, describing scenes of his descent into the agony of the cross. There he was hated and persecuted without reason. There he paid what he had not stolen. He was given vinegar for his thirst (John 19:28-29). People who passed by on the road mocked him (Mark 15:29-32). For our sake, Jesus sank to the depths of hell (Mark 15:34), even though he was pure and sinless (Hebrews 4:15).

God's mercy for us is clear in the forgiveness we have because of Jesus' suffering. And this moves us to forgive and care for others, who may have sunk into miry depths on their own. Knowing that we are all sinners who need the Savior, we can point others to Christ and help them out of the mire too.

For all who believe, Jesus has borne the punishment for *all our sin*. And, rising from the dead and ascending to heaven, he went on ahead to prepare a place for us in God's kingdom, where "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (Revelation 21:4).

O God, save us from our sins and folly. And guide us to love others because you first loved us. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

WISDOM'S RARE AND BEAUTIFUL TREASURES

By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established. . . .
—Proverbs 24:3

A Japanese pastor friend, with whom we worked for many years as missionaries, gave us a beautiful bronze statue of hawks lifting off in flight. He had inherited it from his father, and he gave it to us as a farewell present when we returned to the United States. Now in a place of honor in our home in America, it stands as a rare and beautiful treasure that holds a flood of memories for us.

Our proverb for today teaches that the house of our lives is best built with wisdom, which comes from God. "Through understanding it is established," and "through knowledge" provided by the one true God "its rooms are filled with rare and beautiful treasures."

Jesus talks about a house like that in a parable about wise and foolish builders (Matthew 7:24-27): "Everyone who hears these words of mine and

puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock."

With wisdom we build our lives on the solid rock of the love of God in Christ. The commands of God give us firm flooring, the protective arms of God are like walls keeping out the cold, and the Word of God is like windows letting in God's light.

We all struggle to build a good life. Jesus and his good news are the keys to doing so. May we have heavenly wisdom each day to build our lives and to share God's love with others.

O God, help us to build our lives with wisdom and to share your love and light in this world, remembering all you have done and that you are with us always. In Jesus' name, Amen.

PEARLY GATES, STREETS OF GOLD

The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass.
—Revelation 21:21

Astronomers say that the heavy metals in the periodic table of the elements (gold, platinum, uranium) were formed under tremendous pressure in the depths of giant stars in the far reaches of the universe. They were scattered as far as our solar system by the explosion of those stars and became part of our earth. Here they are rare, precious gifts from God.

Streets of gold! Gates made from single pearls! Unfathomable riches! Imagine if your front door was made from a slice of one huge pearl!

Everything about the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem, speaks to the riches of the plan of salvation and the glory of God. There are twelve gates, by which the nations of the earth can stream in from all directions to their eternal blessing. There is no temple in the city “because

the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.” And by God’s great salvation, people from all nations will be able to bring their splendor and glory and honor, all that God has blessed and purified in Christ, into this ultimate Holy City of God, which is also called the Bride of the Lamb.

Though we can’t fully wrap our minds around these descriptions, we can be sure that the reality will be far more wonderful than words could describe and we could imagine.

Praise to you, our Creator and Redeemer! Thank you that, through faith, our names are written in the Lamb’s book of life. In Christ’s name we worship you, O God, for ever and ever! Amen.

TRUE FASTING

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?"
—Isaiah 58:6

In some Christian communities, fasting is not emphasized. In others, especially during Lent (the season leading up to Easter), fasting is a way of remembering the suffering of our Lord.

In ancient Israel, fasting included wearing robes of sackcloth, bowing one's head in mourning, beating one's breast, and lying on a bed of ashes. All of this was meant to be a sign of humbling oneself and repenting of sin.

But, said God in the days of Isaiah the prophet, all he saw was a hypocritical show. Instead of really repenting of their sin, the Israelites went right on oppressing their workers, fighting among themselves, ignoring people who needed food and shelter and clothing.

What can a Christian do to engage in true fasting without just going through the motions?

I know one family who keeps a coffee can on the counter and puts all its spare change into it for the poor. A wealthier family might build a small house on their property to offer temporary shelter to a homeless person. One of the central ideas of fasting is to reduce our own consumption so that we may have enough to share with people who are in need.

What can you do to show God's love to someone in need today?

Lord, we are blessed. Help us to use less of our wealth on ourselves, and more on people who really need it. In Jesus' name, we ask for the will to love others as you do. Amen.

BEAUTIFULLY paneled houses

"Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?" —Haggai 1:3-4

After the Jews returned from exile in Babylon, they began to prosper. They started rebuilding the temple which had been ruined by the Babylonians. But the people of other religions who lived in the land sent letters to Babylon and complained that the Jews were preparing to revolt. For that and other reasons, the rebuilding of the temple stopped.

It seems that the Jews began with a will to rebuild the temple, but when opposition arose, they faltered and lost focus. They transferred their energy to building and beautifying their own houses. It took the searing words of Haggai to call them back to the priority of rebuilding God's temple.

In the world today, we must not be discouraged by the struggle it takes to build Christ's church. The forces of the devil will try to overcome it, but Jesus

will prevail (Matthew 16:18). Remember what Jesus said: "Seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33).

It's not that God necessarily wants you to live in a bleak apartment without beautiful paneling. But if that's what it takes to build God's kingdom, we must be willing to sacrifice. Our treasures are in heaven.

Lord, sometimes we grow weary of the spiritual warfare we are engaged in. Help us not to settle for secondary priorities when they tempt us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE LOVE YOU HAD AT FIRST

"You have forsaken the love you had at first. . . . Repent and do the things you did at first."
—Revelation 2:4-5

When believers endure hardship for Christ's name, they can be a powerful force to reckon with. But it's possible to lose the fervor of the love we had for the Lord at first. If that happens, the church becomes almost unnoticeable in the world. Let's not ignore criticism from people who may say the church is just a social club. That may call for some soul-searching.

Today's Bible passage describes part of a vision the apostle John received from Jesus, who told him to write these words to the church in Ephesus. That church had been started by Paul some 50 years earlier. They had been persecuted and had not caved in, and they had matured enough to resist false teachings.

But over the years, the church at Ephesus had lost the initial fervor of its love for Jesus. That was the height from which they had fallen. They needed

to return to the love they had had for the Lord at first. All other commands flow from "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength." And this leads to the next great command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (See Mark 12:28-34.)

If we find ourselves criticizing the poor (in general) for laziness, immorality, or addictions—but doing nothing to help—that may be a sign that we are lacking compassion. Remember how Jesus saw the crowds and had compassion on them (Mark 6:34-44).

Save us, O Lord, from losing the love we had for you when we were struck by your amazing grace. Let your love so burn in our hearts that it warms all our relationships. Amen.

MORE SPLENDID THAN SOLOMON

"Consider how the wild flowers grow. . . . Not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these." —Luke 12:27

Bobby McFerrin's mother taught him to love the Lord. When he grew up, he wrote the hit song "Don't Worry, Be Happy." The song's opening lines say: "In every life we have some trouble. But when you worry, you make it double."

Jesus said, "I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear." Consider the ravens; consider the wild flowers. God feeds them; God clothes them. And you are much more valuable in his sight than birds and flowers. Trust God for your daily bread and bodily needs.

Because so many of us live lives of little faith, we are often filled with fear and insecurity. We toil and fret and hold tight what we manage to earn. We set our hearts on these things. We run after these things.

So many of us are often so preoccupied with "getting and spending [that] we lay waste our powers," as the poet William Wordsworth put it. And in the process we act like unbelievers.

There is a freedom that comes with trusting God. We can sell some of our possessions without fear of becoming poor, and we can give to people in need, becoming richer ourselves, with treasure in heaven.

Increase our faith, Lord, for we are prone to worry. Give us a quiet, trusting, and loving heart, that we may remember people in need. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

HIGH CLASS, LOW CLASS ALIKE

I thought, "These are only the poor. . . . So I will go to the leaders and speak to them; surely they know the way of the LORD. . . ." But . . . they too had broken off the yoke. —Jeremiah 5:4-5

Jeremiah's words sound biased in favor of the leader class in his society. He was, after all, the son of a priest—not a farmer.

But Jeremiah could see the faults of the leaders of his people too. His hopes that "surely [the leaders] know the way of the LORD" were dashed.

God had set before him a challenge: "If you can find but one person who deals honestly and seeks the truth, I will forgive this city."

This was an echo of God's promise to Abraham—that if there were ten righteous people in Sodom, he would not destroy the city (Genesis 18:32). Actually, Jeremiah received a more generous promise: if he could find *even one* righteous person, God would forgive the city!

People in our day who are critical of the poor should look closely at the sins of the elite. Is there more acceptance of the Word of God? Is it only the poor who make unwise choices in their behavior?

"With one accord [the leaders] too had broken off the yoke." High class or low, salvation is always and only by the grace of God.

Thank you, O God, that you neither patronize the poor nor favor the rich. Thank you that your offer of salvation is the same for everyone everywhere, in Jesus. Amen.

WORKING AND SHARING

Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

—Ephesians 4:28

Again and again, the Bible calls us to share with people in need: in the Law of Moses, in the Prophets, in Jesus' teaching, and here in the letters of Paul.

The command to work hard, "doing something useful with [our] own hands," earning enough that something might be left over, goes hand in hand with being compassionate.

What's more, Paul presents working and sharing as a way to climb out of a dishonest way of life. There's something clean and good about doing something useful—and then giving the surplus away. It reverses the old way of life in which a person would steal from unsuspecting, innocent passers-by, often by lurking in dark places and waiting to prey on them.

Paul calls us back from the abyss of a corrupt life to the

truth that our first ancestors had God-given work to do. How good to plant seeds, water them, and see them send up shoots; how good to tend and prune and sweep, taking care of the garden of creation we were given (Genesis 2:15).

Paul shows us a way of life that is characterized by growth in Christ, in a loving community of believers who do something good and useful—not sitting around idly gossiping, sniping at each other, fueling conflict and bitterness. How wonderful is the fellowship of loving, kind, compassionate people redeemed by Christ!

Lord, we long to grow into a loving community in Christ, useful and compassionate to people in need. Guide us, we pray. Amen.

SUPPORTING JESUS' MINISTRY

These women were helping to support [Jesus and the disciples] out of their own means.
—Luke 8:3

Today we are reminded of a seldom-noted aspect of Jesus' ministry: several women helped to support Jesus and the twelve disciples out of their own means. In other words, with their own money they helped to take care of food, clothing, shelter, and other incidental expenses.

Jesus had been a builder, and some of the twelve disciples had been fishermen. But they left their employment when they began their traveling ministry. Jesus once said, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). He didn't own furniture or a cozy little bungalow. He and the twelve disciples depended on the generosity of people like Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna.

This was not an entirely new pattern of ministry. Many years

earlier, a widow in Zarephath provided the prophet Elijah with an upper room in her house and food to eat each day (1 Kings 17)—and the Lord supplied all her needs. Similarly, a well-to-do woman in Shunem and her husband made a room for Elisha on the roof of their home, and they put a bed, table, and chair in it so he had a place to stay when he was in the area (2 Kings 4).

All the good things we have are gifts from God (James 1:17). What can you share to help in the service of God's kingdom?

Lord Jesus, we want to follow you. Guide us to know what our calling is, and how to serve you in it. In your name we pray. Amen.

LIFE'S WORRIES, RICHES, AND PLEASURES

"The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature." —Luke 8:14

Have you ever been so wrapped up in your work that even when you're at home, you're not really "all there"? Have you ever been so consumed by worry that you hardly notice the rich blessings around you?

Have you been driven to reach that next pay grade, get that new car with all the bells and whistles, or scoop up that new smartphone that no one else has yet? Or how about that slick new boat, that lakeside property, or even that amazing new power tool? If something like that is driving you, it's time to step back, take a deep breath, and ask God if you are doing the right thing.

The pleasures and distractions Jesus is talking about in this parable don't have to be sinful to choke our maturity in the Christian life.

Be honest with yourself and the Lord. It's not wrong to enjoy great blessings, to set goals for building a business, or to have a bucket list, but it would be a huge mistake to let anything but the Lord be your motivator.

If we are distracted or driven by life's troubles and worries, or by trends, gadgets, or gains and the pleasures they seem to offer, we won't grow mature in the truly good life God intends for us. Instead, we will let those things take over in our lives, choking out the rich and full life God wants us to enjoy forever.

Your parables, Lord Jesus, often give us a wake-up call. Guide our thoughts and actions each day, that we may live the best life possible, centered on your Word for living. Amen.

TWO SMALL COPPER COINS

A poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.
—Mark 12:42

Jesus had a special place in his heart for widows and orphans. That's not just because the Law of Moses commanded that they be protected, but because *he himself* is the God who loves them and commanded Israel to love them. Deuteronomy 10:17-19 says, "The LORD your God ... shows no partiality. . . . He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt."

Israel was prone to forget that at one time they had been at the mercy of slave drivers, with no rights guaranteed by law. Even today it is possible to forget what it was like for our ancestors to be immigrants with a shaky knowledge of English. It was a godsend if there was

someone who could sponsor them and help them get started in a new land.

Sociologist Matt Ridley says that we have made enormous strides through the centuries in broadening the base of prosperity. Yet Jesus said, "The poor you will always have with you" (Matthew 26:11; see Deuteronomy 15:11). He said this not to encourage a defeatist, passive, pass-the-buck attitude. But, in spite of concerted efforts by communities and governments, the poor *are* always among us. And individual love and generosity will never be out of place.

O God, thank you for your many blessings. Help us to be a blessing to people who are in need. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

BREAD OF GOD, BREAD OF LIFE

"The bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."
—John 6:35

When crowds of people followed Jesus around, he spoke to them about the kingdom of God and healed many who were sick. One day, when they were all in a remote place and hungry, he even fed a crowd of many thousands—all with a boy's lunch of five barley loaves and two small fish.

Yet Jesus was not content with setting up a free lunch program. When the crowds sought him out and found him again, he said, "Truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill." He knew they were looking for more food. They were attracted, of course, by his healing and teaching, but—wow!—he could even multiply food. Think how useful that could be! They wouldn't have to buy groceries anymore. And just

think how far an army could go with him as their king!

But Jesus warned, "Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." And by this he meant, "As you work for your groceries, even more eagerly seek the bread of heaven."

The people were confused because they didn't listen to Jesus' teaching. But the bread of life that they really needed was the gift of Jesus' life, which would give renewed, real, and everlasting "life to the world."

O God, we need real life. Give us each day our daily bread—and help us always to remember that what we really need is you. Fill us with faith and trust in you, we pray. In Jesus, Amen.

I HAVE THE RIGHT TO DO ANYTHING, BUT . . .

"I have the right to do anything"—but I will not be mastered by anything.
—1 Corinthians 6:12

As our verse for today shows, some people twisted the teaching about freedom in Christ to mean that Christians were free to do anything they pleased. Similarly, some others had reasoned that they should go on sinning so that the grace of God's forgiveness could increase (Romans 6:1).

No, says Paul. We have died to sin, and our freedom in Christ does not mean that everything we can do is good for ourselves or for others. We must still be wary of committing sin, which offends God and others.

On the matter of building up wealth, Paul would say, it was permissible, but his lifestyle showed that he did not use that right. As Paul describes his situation in 2 Corinthians 6:10, he was "poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

C.S. Lewis points out in his book *The Abolition of Man* that many people in history have seen the value of forgoing some things that might well be permissible. For example, Lao Tsu, a sixth-century-B.C. Chinese philosopher, said, "To have little is to possess. To have plenty is to be perplexed."

We might not take a vow of poverty like some monks, using a piece of rope for a belt or living in hollow trees for minimal shelter. But we must be careful that affluence does not master us so that we are free to spread the love of God in Christ, the riches of eternal life in him.

Lord, open our eyes, that we may be aware of what shackles us. May you alone be our Master—and as we serve you, may we help many grow rich in the love of Jesus. Amen.

WISDOM: MORE PRECIOUS THAN RUBIES

Blessed are those who find wisdom. . . . She is more precious than rubies.
—Proverbs 3:13-15

The book of Proverbs presents two women of different character. One is Wisdom personified. “She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her” (Proverbs 3:15). She calls people to shun evil and turn to God.

The other woman, Folly, is loud and defiant. She calls out from her door with temptations to immoral living: “Stolen water is sweet; food eaten in secret is delicious!” (9:17). Describing her as an adulterous woman, Proverbs says, “Many are the victims she has brought down. . . . Do not let your heart turn to her ways. . . . Her house is a highway to the grave” (7:25-27).

Proverbs is populated by thieves, sluggards, quarrelers, mockers, and gossips, as well as people who are wise, careful, just, kind, and generous. And we are all humbled by the words “Who can say, ‘I have

kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin’?” (20:9).

The wisdom of the Bible calls us back to God, to repentance from sin, to right living. We grow to recognize that putting God first in our lives is the only way to truly live. That is why Proverbs 9:10 says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

Our search for wisdom leads us to Jesus Christ, “who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:30).

Lord, you are our heart's desire, our treasure more precious than rubies. Thank you that we have the riches of full life in Christ. Amen.

THE BRIDEGROOM AND THE BRIDE

As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.
—Isaiah 62:5

Marriage is a metaphor often used in the Bible to describe God's love for his people. Certainly "treasures in heaven" has rich meaning, and the Lord often uses that phrase to express the infinite value of salvation and eternal life. But in Isaiah 62 and other passages, we also find word pictures describing the Lord as a bridegroom rejoicing over his people as his bride. It is a deeply personal metaphor.

Isaiah prophesied about the destruction of Jerusalem, the people's exile to another land, and, later, their restoration. The promise of salvation is pictured this way: "No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate. But you will be called Hephzibah ['My Delight is in her'], and your land Beulah ['Married']." And "as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you."

Revelation 21:2-3 describes the "new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband." And a loud voice says, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people. . . . They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God."

We eagerly await that day. The new Jerusalem will shine "with the glory of God, and its brilliance [will be] like that of a very precious jewel" (Revelation 21:11). And "the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!'" (22:17).

Our hearts overflow with joy at the promise of our eternal inheritance, that you, Lord, will live with us forever. We give you thanks. In Jesus, Amen.



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