

July/Aug 2022

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

DISCERNING
GOD'S WILL



ALSO: GOOD NEWS FOR THE POOR

Friends:

Jesus has a heart for the poor. From start to finish, Jesus' teaching and preaching proclaim the good news of release from sin and death. His announcement of the coming of God's kingdom includes good news not only for eternity but also for our lives here and now in the world we live in. As Jesus brought the good news of God's kingdom, he wants us to do so as well. In July, pastor, missionary, and teacher Roy Berkenbosch focuses on Christ's command for us to address the problem of poverty and the needs of the poor.



In August, pastor and teacher Evan Heerema shares with us the Bible's teaching on discerning God's will. Do you want to know what God is saying to you? In order to find out, we need to acknowledge God as our Creator and submit to him. Then we need to open God's Word and ask the Holy Spirit to speak to us. Only by seeking to follow God can we live with joy and freedom in loving and serving him and the people around us.

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 line extending from the end.

Kurt Selles

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"Good News for the Poor"
Roy Berkenbosch



"Discerning God's Will"
Evan Heerema

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ReFrame
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Good News for the Poor

Roy Berkenbosch

july

One of the world's greatest challenges is poverty and its consequences of suffering. About 780 million people live in extreme poverty today. This is a challenge for the church of Jesus Christ, and the Bible often reminds us that God cares for the poor and acts on their behalf with love and compassion. God calls us to do the same. In these devotions, Roy Berkenbosch draws from the Bible's message and his experiences with World Renew (see worldrenew.net) to remind us of God's heart for the poor.

Roy Berkenbosch is a minister who served with World Renew in several capacities and served as a pastor in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He is also the founding director of the Micah Centre at The King's University, Edmonton, Alberta. Now retired, he and his wife enjoy their small hobby farm.

Discerning God's Will

Evan Heerema

august

Becoming a disciple of Jesus includes the decision to change our boss. We often think we can be our own boss. But Jesus calls us to recognize him as Lord and King and to serve him by doing God's will. How do we know what God's will is? We find it in the Bible. The Bible is the revealed will of God. We need to read it, reflect on it, ask the Holy Spirit for understanding, and listen to the Spirit as he teaches us the truth to live by, following Jesus' example.

Evan Heerema is a retired pastor who served churches in Washington state and in Michigan. He was also on the teaching staff at Kuyper College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, for ten years. He and his wife are the parents of two daughters and the grandparents of two grandsons.

LOVE THAT ABOUNDS

This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best. . . .
—Philippians 1:9-10

The apostle Paul and the church in Philippi shared a great love for each other. Because of his love for them, Paul wanted the Philippians' love to abound in knowledge and insight so that they could live more like Jesus. With knowledge and insight, the Christians in Philippi could better discern all that is true and good. Knowing what is true and good would prepare them to love as Jesus does. The focus for a follower of Jesus is to love God above all and to love your neighbor as yourself.

How can I love God and my neighbor without knowing the will of God? To try to love God and my neighbor apart from knowing God's will and his ways would put me in a battle against God—with my will versus God's will. But that would be a battle I would always lose. Thankfully, I do not have to take on that kind of battle.

In his love for us, God gave us his Word (the Bible), and he sent Jesus (the living Word) to show us how to live. Following Jesus' example, we too, like Paul and the Philippians, can grow to abound in knowledge and insight as we humbly seek to love God and our neighbor.

Gracious Father, thank you for sending us Jesus to reveal your love and to show us a new way of life. Fill us with your Spirit, that we may strive to follow Jesus today. Amen.

THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.
—Proverbs 9:10

I tend to err on the side of caution. If there is risk involved, I will pause and evaluate the situation so that I can make a decision that will keep me as safe as possible. At an early age I learned that respecting things like the law of gravity and the authority of people in charge was better than disrespecting things that I cannot control.

That helps me understand what the author of Proverbs is saying here. Fearing the Lord does not mean being scared of God, as if he were a tyrant waiting to take his anger out on us. To fear the Lord is to give him respect and reverence. After all, God is the Creator who graciously made a covenant with his people. He deserves our respect. God has promised to provide his people with all that they need. He deserves our reverence.

Revering the Lord is the first step in developing a vibrant relationship with him. Revering God calls for us to submit ourselves humbly to him—seeking him, listening to him, and obeying him. Fearing the Lord puts us in the position of a servant who loves God and trusts God. That is where God wants us to be, and that is where we need to be.

Creator God, you are good, and you are great. Thank you for letting me know you, and thank you for always being willing to know me. Amen.

TRUST YOUR NAVIGATOR

There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death.
—Proverbs 16:25

On family road trips we would use a map so that we could know where we were, how far we had gone, and how far we needed to go. Those trips provided opportunities for addition and subtraction problems (especially in trying to figure out signs like one on Interstate 80 in Pennsylvania that read, “Mile Run – 2 miles”).

Today GPS services and electronic maps make those old maps nearly obsolete. The mapping service gives us options for the fastest route and some alternate routes—with and without tolls. Travelers soon learn that there is often more than one way to their destination. And, who knows? The one you choose might just become your favorite way.

The Bible shows that there are right roads and wrong roads when it comes to recognizing and following God’s way. A

discerning mind will seek to determine if an opportunity honors God or not. That opportunity might look good at first, but it could end up at a dead end spiritually, emotionally, and even physically.

The Spirit of God equips us with eyes to see and ears to hear what God says is the right way. If there is no confirmation of God’s approval, then it might be better to look for another route.

God of wisdom, fill us with your Spirit so that the direction of our lives will stay on course with your will and way. Bring us home to you, for your glory. Amen.

“WHAT ABOUT YOU?”

“What about you?” [Jesus] asked. “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”
—Matthew 16:15-16

A trip to Israel, to visit places where Jesus walked, may include a stop at Banias in the northern part of the country. Banias was a settlement at the foot of Mount Hermon, and a spring from there makes a river that flows into the Jordan River. At the time of Jesus' ministry, Banias was called Panias and was dedicated to the worship of the Greek god Pan.

So it is not surprising that as Jesus and his disciples went into that area, he asked them a defining question: “Who do you say I am?” In other words, “Do you recognize me for who I really am, or am I just another object of worship like you see here? How do you discern my person, my teaching, and my miracles?”

Peter, inspired by God, responded by saying, “You are the Messiah”—that is, the

Christ (“Anointed One”). Peter declared that Jesus was the anointed Son of God who came to bring the kingdom of God. Jesus came to restore all that is broken by sin.

Decidedly different from false Greek gods and the worship they were known for, Jesus is the true “Son of the living God.” Jesus is the real thing.

Who do you say Jesus is?

Loving God, you sent Jesus into this world to provide freedom for everyone held captive by sin, suffocating under the lies of spiritual darkness. Thank you for guiding us to know Jesus for who he really is. For Jesus' sake, draw many more to him today. Amen.

“GET BEHIND ME, SATAN”

Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan!” . . . You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”
—Matthew 16:23

The words of Jesus to Peter here came soon after the faith-filled profession Peter had made when he said to Jesus, “You are the Messiah” (Matt. 16:16). Jesus was now teaching his disciples that he had come to suffer, be killed, and rise again. He would offer himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Hearing that, Peter rebuked Jesus, saying, “Never, Lord! . . . This shall never happen to you!” So Jesus called Peter out and revealed that he had missed the main point of Jesus’ mission. From a human standpoint we can sympathize with Peter. We too would likely be shocked to hear that Jesus had come to suffer and die in order to rise again and give us new, abundant life.

Today, though, we know how important it is to discern truth

from lies, listening for God’s Word rather than listening to the lies of false religions and false teachers around us—don’t we? It should be clear to us that it takes effort and perseverance to prepare ourselves to discern properly.

So until Jesus returns to make all things new, we must read the Bible and listen to Jesus, who died because he loved us, rose from the dead, and ascended to heaven to make his abundant life available for all who believe in him. Trust the truth, the way, and the life.

Risen and ascended Lord, you are the Messiah, and I confess that my actions and words do not always confirm that. Give me the strength and courage to stand up for you always. Amen.

WORD AND DEED

The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him."—Mark 1:27

When God's enemy and ours, the devil, tempted Adam and Eve and humanity fell into sin (Genesis 3), all of our relationships were broken—with God, with each other, with ourselves, and with creation. Temptation and sin opened the way for the devil and his followers—impure spirits—to attack and influence our lives, sometimes even taking possession of people's hearts, minds, and bodies.

God's Son, Jesus, came into the world to rebuild what was broken and to restore the goodness of creation, healing many people's bodies and minds. Jesus came as God's authoritative Word, and with power he drove impure spirits out of the people they had possessed.

The crowd in Capernaum heard the Word of God and saw the power of God that

Sabbath day. They were amazed to see God's love presented to them in the person of Jesus. And as he worked wonders in God's great plan of salvation, Jesus showed that his power was far greater than any demonic presence.

The people heard Jesus speak God's Word, and they saw his amazing acts of restoration. They witnessed "God with us," Immanuel, and they spread the news about him everywhere.

Lord, thank you for showing your love in the person of Jesus Christ. May we seek him in the written Word you have given us, and may we tell of your power and love everywhere. Amen.

TAKE TIME FOR THE HOLY ONE

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.

—Mark 1:35

In the streaming series *The Chosen*, one episode depicts Jesus returning to a camp where he and his disciples are staying for the night. It is late, and Jesus has spent the day healing crowds of people. He stumbles into camp, exhausted from the day's ministry. The disciples can only watch him, surprised at how tired he is. His teaching and healing work must have been exhausting. Though he was fully God, Jesus was also fully human, so he got tired and needed sleep (see Mark 4:38; John 4:6).

Our reading for today explains that after a long day of teaching and healing, Jesus rose early in the morning to pray. Jesus needed time to connect with his Father in prayer, resting in his Father's presence and focusing on his purpose. He had come to do much more than heal people in Capernaum,

even though that was clearly important while he was there. When the disciples went out and found him, he said, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come."

Jesus spent time in prayer with his Father, and he remained focused on his purpose. If this was important to Jesus, it is certainly important for his followers too. Let's be sure to spend personal time with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each day.

Father, I need to spend time with you, just as Jesus did. Lord, lead me, guide me, and give me the strength I need for the work you have planned. Amen.

GOD IS MY ROCK

The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. . . .
—Psalm 18:2

David, who was anointed to become king of Israel, had many enemies, and he wrote the words of Psalm 18 at a time when God delivered him from those enemies, including Saul, the king he would replace (see 2 Samuel 22).

At times David was so overwhelmed by his enemies that he felt as if “the cords of death entangled” him. He felt that his end was near. In response, David called on the only one who could help. “I called to the LORD, who is worthy of praise, and I have been saved from my enemies.”

David displayed great courage based on his trust in God, his rock and deliverer. David had been taught and had learned from experience that the Lord was always present for him. No enemy could separate him from the care of the Lord.

When we know that we depend on God for all good things, as David did, we know that calling on God will help to bring the solutions we need. This doesn’t mean we should ignore emergency services or other kinds of help that are available when we might need them. God provides those resources in our communities for the good of everyone. But realizing that we can rely on God to help us with all our needs is a great comfort today just as it was for David. Let’s be sure to call on God whenever we need help of any kind.

O God, often we forget to look to you for help when we need it. Teach us to lean on you for protection, guidance, and all that we need, knowing you provide all good things. Amen.

“YOU CAN BE A TRANSLATOR”

They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.

—Psalm 19:3-4

In my first German-language lesson in high school, I was taught to ask, “Where is the post office, please?” If I were in Germany and needed to mail a letter home, I would need to ask, “Wo ist das Post, bitte?” If you travel to countries where the language is unfamiliar, you know how important it is to learn some basics in the local language.

But how do we learn a language that has no words and no sounds? Psalm 19 teaches us that the language of the heavens and the skies has no words, yet their voice goes out to the ends of the earth, revealing knowledge.

Some never notice it, but others learn and understand. God has gifted them to observe that creation has an amazing Creator. The heavens declare the glory of God, and the Spirit

of God helps us understand. A discerning mind sees and hears God’s hand in all he has created. And we can praise God for all these things.

Look up at the heavens. Look down at the flowers. See the stars and smell the roses. They all proclaim that the mighty God has graced us with breathtaking displays of his creative hand.

To God be the glory!

God of creation, Lord of all that we see and hear and touch and smell, thank you for this great world you have given us to live in and care for. We praise your great and powerful name. Amen.

DELIVER ME FROM EVIL

Who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults.

—Psalm 19:12

When I was in grade school, there were many times that I thought a teacher or a parent had eyes in the back of their head. I could not get away with anything I was not supposed to be doing. Sometimes my hidden thoughts were identified by those who were not even looking at me. And to prevent me from even trying something out of line, they said, "Just remember, God sees everything you do."

Having someone watching our every move can help to keep our actions in check, but what about our thoughts and the things we are tempted to say? When we allow the bright light of God's law to shine into our inner self, it illuminates our hidden faults and lights up a warning. Without God's law we are blind to what separates us from God.

The psalmist knows that he cannot see his faults by looking into a mirror. He looks instead into God's law and asks God to forgive not only his visible sins but also his hidden faults.

And the God of the Bible does forgive. Knowing the fact of God's forgiveness assures the psalmist that he will be blameless in God's sight. Not perfect yet, but blameless now.

Father God, even though your law is good and I want to obey it, I know I do not. Thank you for Jesus, who kept it perfectly so that by faith I can become one with him in your eyes. I love you, Jesus, and I thank you for loving me. Amen.

DEMAND FOR A SIGN

"When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.'"
—Matthew 16:2-3

The month of August provides some of the warmest days of the year where I live. And in the morning, if the sky is red in the east, there is a good chance of stormy weather, just as people said in Israel back in Jesus' day.

Jesus used that well-known pattern as a "heads up" to the Pharisees and Sadducees who had asked him to show them a sign from heaven. In return he used a sign of the heavens to test them about their belief in him as God's anointed King.

They had already seen and heard about Jesus' teaching and healing miracles, and they were inclined to dismiss them—and him as well. When it came to the gift that God had given them in Jesus, they had ears but could not hear, and they had eyes but could not see.

Jesus predicted another sign as well—not to satisfy their question but to announce that he would rise from the dead. Did you notice that he mentioned "the sign of Jonah"? This meant that just as Jonah was in the belly of a great fish for three days before being spit out on the shore, Jesus would be in a tomb, and on the third day he would rise from the dead.

Many of Jesus' challengers missed that sign too. People still miss it today, but many see, believe, and live the resurrected life with Jesus. Are you living that life too?

Risen Lord, you are the giver of abundant life. Thank you for your amazing gifts. May we help others to see who you really are. Amen.

PAY ATTENTION TO THE BEREANS

The Berean Jews . . . received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.
—Acts 17:11

A class I taught at a local Christian college was called “Gateway to Excellence.” It was an introductory class for all new students. When asked by others what the class was about, I would initially say that it was meant to equip students to become better thinkers and responsible followers of Jesus in their career choices.

As a follower and servant of Jesus, I must be fully committed to his cause. Because of his love for me, Jesus died for me and equipped me with spiritual gifts so that I can serve him here on earth. And through his Spirit, Jesus promises to be with us until he comes again.

When Paul went to Berea, he taught these things to the people there. And the Bereans were good thinkers who did not just take information at face value; they also examined

the Scriptures to confirm what Paul was saying. Recognizing the truth of God in Paul’s message, many of them became believers in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the Savior.

Smart people need to be wise people, and wise people need to be listened to, talked with, questioned, and accepted if what they are saying is the truth.

Be a student and thinker who digs into God’s Word, finding the way, the truth, and the life.

God of wisdom, fill our hearts with the truth of your Word so that we will be “quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry” (James 1:19), showing grace and patience for your sake. Amen.

MAKE YOURSELF AVAILABLE

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

—Acts 13:2

In Acts 1:8 Jesus told his disciples they would be his witnesses "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." In Acts 13 the church at Antioch, including Saul and Barnabas, prayerfully waited for direction from God. The church of Jesus Christ is called to listen for the Spirit's leading as we ask, "What do you want us to do next?"

The Antioch church was fasting and praying in a position of readiness, eager to hear the Lord's orders and to obey them. And the Spirit of God responded with a clear directive: "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

They were not to go on their own mission project, nor the church's. They were to do the work of the Holy Spirit. They

needed to continue to listen for what the Spirit would tell them to do and where to do it.

You and I must have a heart of submission to the Spirit. We need to be open to the plans that the Spirit of God has for us so that God can work in and through our lives. The Spirit is looking for us to continue the work of Jesus.

Loving God, each person in this world is an object of your love. And by your Spirit you call us to bear witness to your truth. Give us your clear directions, we pray. Amen.

PREPARED FOR THE SPIRIT'S WORK

Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! . . . Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?" —Acts 13:9-10

Barnabas, Saul (Paul), and John (Mark) were on a mission to bring the good news of God's salvation in Jesus to people who had not heard it before. And they met some resistance from Elymas, a sorcerer and false prophet. Our enemy, the devil, was trying to stop the gospel from being preached there. Elymas went so far as to try turning his employer, the proconsul, away from having faith in Christ.

Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, let the power of the Spirit do his work against this demonic influence. The words sound harsh, but then so did Jesus' words to Peter when he said, "Get behind me Satan" (Matthew 16:23).

There is only one way to be right with God. And that means opening ourselves to

be filled with the Spirit of God, "the Spirit of truth" who guides us "into all truth" (John 16:13).

In response to the teaching about the Lord, and having seen the powerful work of the Spirit through Paul, the proconsul believed. In a battle between God's Spirit and the devil's lies, the Spirit will always win.

Let us be wise in who we follow.

Thank you, Father, for the gift of your Son, Jesus, and for the empowerment of your Spirit in your church. May the church be humble, strong, and faithful. Amen.

A HUMBLE LEADER

Then one of the synagogue leaders, named Jairus, came, and when he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet.
—Mark 5:22

Before I was born, a brother of mine passed away at the age of fourteen months. My parents had done all they could to find medical help and healing for him. Similarly, Jairus, a synagogue leader, feared losing his young daughter, and he also did all he could to gain healing for his child.

Jairus was responsible to help with the smooth running of the synagogue in town, which led worship and instruction for the local Jewish community. He likely had also heard that some other religious leaders, the Pharisees, didn't like Jesus and had warned people to watch out for him. The Pharisees enjoyed their position of power as teachers of the law and rulers of the people, and they felt threatened by Jesus' popularity and his amazing miracles. They had even begun plotting to find a way to kill Jesus (Mark 3:6).

Despite all that, Jairus wanted healing for his daughter. So he went to see Jesus.

Jairus also left his pride and dignity behind. As a respected leader in the community, he was not expected to submit to a stranger in his town, and yet he fell at the feet of Jesus in great humility. Jairus did not care who saw him do this because he knew he needed Jesus' help.

Followers of Jesus leave their preconceptions and pride behind when they come to Jesus. He is Lord and King of all. In him we find the power to heal—body and soul.

King Jesus, help me to realize who you are, and to be humble before you. Thank you for your love and care. Amen.

WITH GOD ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE

Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished.

—Mark 5:42

When Jairus's daughter got up and started walking around, the people there were astonished. We do not need to wonder why. The young girl had died but was alive again! When Jesus had arrived at the house, the community mourners had already begun their customary crying and wailing. The people figured there was no reason to bother Jesus anymore, for the girl had died.

Their behavior contrasted with the calm and persistence of Jesus, however. And when he said, "Don't be afraid; just believe," the people laughed at him.

Ordering all those people out of the house, Jesus took the father and mother, along with three of his disciples, to where the child was. And I wonder if Jesus smiled a little himself. He knew Psalm 2:4-6: "The One

enthroned in heaven laughs; the LORD scoffs at them . . . saying, 'I have installed my king. . .'" The confirmation of Jesus as King meant that weeping would be turned into joy, and Jesus knew that he would turn wailing into amazement.

Jesus calmly and gently ordered the girl to get up. No more death, just life and praise to God as a sign of his kingdom coming to earth.

In your dark times, watch for Jesus; he still comes with power, bringing hope.

Risen Lord, forgive us for seeing darkness instead of your light. Walk into our situations with us, reveal yourself, and strengthen our hope in you, Prince of peace. Amen.

THE PEACE THAT FOLLOWS CONFESSION

I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD." And you forgave the guilt of my sin.
—Psalm 32:5

It has been said that "confession is good for the soul." This statement is not in the Bible, but God's Word indicates that when we confess our sins in true repentance, God forgives us in his mercy, and we find peace with God. We are released from the guilt of our sin, and we find comfort in the Lord's unfailing love.

Psalm 32 describes this process beautifully. It opens with these words: "Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered." And near the end it says that "the LORD's unfailing love surrounds the one who trusts in him."

The psalmist admits that trying to keep his sin hidden, or secret, weighed heavily on him. The guilt of sin became such a great burden that it sapped his strength. Deep down, he knew he could not hide his sin

from God, so he gave up trying. He confessed his sin, and he received forgiveness. What a relief! The weight of all that guilt was lifted.

Confession requires that we allow the light of the Spirit of God to penetrate our heart; identify ungodly thoughts, words, and actions; and turn them over to God. God is the one able to forgive, for Jesus' sake—and he does.

Loving Father, thank you for sending your Son to pay the price for our sins. He not only accomplished that for us but also rose to life again, to give eternal life to all who trust in him. All glory be to God, our Savior! Amen.

THE COST OF FOLLOWING JESUS

"Those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples."
—Luke 14:33

As a homeowner, I need to keep my lawn mowed in the summertime, and that's something I do myself. The weather can get warm in August, so I can spend quite a bit of energy doing the lawn. The exercise is good, but when I am done, I can tell that I have used up strength and energy. It costs me something to do the work.

In our reading for today, Jesus talks about the cost of following him. Some of his words sound harsh, and sometimes Jesus spoke this way to make clear that following him is not easy. Instead, it can be very hard work.

For example, following Jesus can mean that our relationships with family and friends become strained because they do not believe in him. But Jesus is not saying we must literally "hate" them, because we also know that he calls us

to love everyone, even our enemies (Matthew 6:44). In another passage Jesus states the same thing in a way that is easier to understand: "Anyone who loves their father or mother . . . [or] son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37). In other words, to follow Jesus, we need to put him first in our lives. We need to be willing to put aside everything else we have to be his disciples.

Friends, following Jesus will cost you. Others might ridicule you, laugh at you, beat you, or even kill you. But, rest assured, nothing can separate you from the love of God.

Lord, strengthen the faith of all who are persecuted because of you. Give us the courage to follow you, whatever the cost. Amen.

HEARTS TRANSFORMED

They only heard the report: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they praised God because of me.
—Galatians 1:23-24

Paul had started the young churches in the region of Galatia, but now they were floundering because some false teachers had led them astray (Galatians 1:6-10). Instead, they had needed to be encouraged and enfolded to remember the good news of Jesus and to live for him alone.

So Paul tells briefly how God changed him from a persecutor of Christ-followers to a fully committed ambassador of Jesus (see Acts 9). His transformation was not about him but about Jesus. And eventually he went to Jerusalem to meet with the leaders of the church who lived there. Then Paul moved on to spread the gospel to regions north of Judea. And when the churches in Judea heard about him, the Spirit made clear that Paul was truly converted to "preaching the faith he once tried to destroy."

That brought all the believers to praise God. And instead of fearing Paul, they rejoiced on account of him.

People who come to know Jesus as their Savior need to be received with praise to God. They have been saved from darkness and brought into the light. They need friends who will bless them and encourage them.

Do you know someone whom you can encourage in this way? Be sure to do so!

God of grace, move us to praise and give thanks to you for bringing sinners to your Son, Jesus, and guide us to encourage and enfold them. Amen.

CHILDREN OF ABRAHAM

Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham.
—Galatians 3:7

Now and then I will spend time studying my ancestry. It is easy to get caught up in finding information on one person, and then another. So far, I have been able to trace my family line back to an ancestor born in 1760.

The Jewish people claim their lineage back to Abraham, from around 2000 B.C. God had given Abraham the sign of circumcision as a symbol of his covenant with him (Genesis 17), so circumcision became part of the Jewish law.

In Galatia, some zealous Jews had been teaching that if people wanted to be Christ-followers, they had to have all of their males circumcised. Then the people would be obedient to God's law and they could live in righteousness, they said.

But Paul had rightly taught that circumcision was not needed

because God had credited Abraham with righteousness long before giving him the sign of circumcision. As Genesis 15:6 says, Abraham "believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness." So Abraham was not righteous by obeying the law but by believing God. Righteousness is by faith, said Paul. That was what he had preached to the Galatians, and that was all they needed. So, he added, all who have faith are "children of Abraham."

If you have faith in Jesus, you are a child of Abraham. And your genealogy goes back 4,000 years to a person of faith, not works. Praise God!

Faithful God, thank you for making your children secure in Jesus and not on the basis of keeping the law. Amen.

KEEPING IN STEP WITH THE SPIRIT

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.
—Galatians 5:22-23

The apostle Paul teaches the Galatian believers to “walk by the Spirit,” be “led by the Spirit,” and “keep in step with the Spirit.”

Though I have never been in a marching band, I am always impressed by how a marching band keeps in step. The players’ steps are orderly and coordinated, and they keep both the music and the band moving forward.

Paul warns about what happens when our steps in life are not in coordination with the Spirit. There is immorality, impurity, conflict, selfish ambition, jealousy, discord, rage, and more. That is a dangerous place to be, and if we live that way, we will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Being in step with the Spirit, however, produces “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness,

goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” Life in Christ is designed to be harmonious. It involves a community loving and serving each other, just as the Trinity—God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—love each other.

These verses can serve as a litmus test of your own life. Do you exhibit selfishness, pride, and conflict? Or do you live with love, goodness, and self-control? How about the community you are a part of? If any of you are out of step with the Spirit, be sure to humble yourselves and be led by the Spirit.

Triune God, help me to love and serve you and my neighbors, including my enemies. Let my life shine as an example of your love. Amen.

TOWARD A GOOD HARVEST

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.
—Galatians 6:7

Our theme this month has been about discerning God's will as we seek to honor and obey him. In our text for today Paul warns us not to deceive ourselves. We should not think more of ourselves than we ought, and we should be faithful in carrying each other's burdens.

This means caring for one another and doing good to all people, not taking pride in our own position of strength or health in any area. If we have health and strength and we are in a position to help someone, we need to realize that God is the one who has given us that position—so that we may honor him in doing good. If we begin thinking that we have earned that position for ourselves, we are in danger—because God will not be mocked.

Again we are challenged to beware of the path we take in

life. We will reap what we sow, so we should sow what is good and true. Paul describes two ways of living. Either we will seek to please our own sinful nature and reap destruction, or we will seek to please the Spirit of God.

In Christ, God has provided the way to eternal life. And because we are given full life in Christ, we can strive to do good to all people. We can love our neighbors by doing good as we have opportunities. And opportunities abound, so we can do good all of the time.

Father in heaven, help us to sow what is good and true, that we can contribute to a harvest that honors you. Give us your wisdom. In Jesus, Amen.

BEING UNITED WITH CHRIST

Make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. —Philippians 2:2

In our reading for today, Paul urges all who believe in Christ to live together in unity, showing a like-mindedness that points to Jesus and the love he has for everyone. Christ came so that all people could have life “to the full” (John 10:10), as God has always intended.

Paul lists some of the benefits that we, like the Philippians, have received from God as his children in Christ: encouragement, comfort, tenderness, compassion, humility, and value. Being united with Christ is to live as Jesus did.

Jesus showed love and compassion to everyone. He loved people with God’s unconditional love. He served people selflessly, humbling himself and lifting others up. No one was unimportant or too small or low-down to receive his attention.

We are called to live as servants of Jesus, free of selfish ambition and vain conceit. We are called to value others above ourselves, and when we serve others in their need, we are serving Christ himself (see Matthew 25:31-40).

In union with Jesus, you and I have a responsibility to live in such a way that all who come into contact with us will sense that Jesus is leading us. His love and character should flow from of us.

Indeed, we have an awesome responsibility!

Thank you, Father, for filling us with life through Jesus, our Savior and King. Fill us to overflowing with your Spirit so that we can live like him, honoring you above all. Amen.

THE MINDSET OF CHRIST JESUS

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.
—Philippians 2:5

We all have relationships. These may include family members, friends, neighbors, coworkers, church members, and especially Jesus. In the city of Philippi, Paul had relationships with a jailer and his household, the city magistrates, Lydia and her household, a female slave who was tormented by a spirit, and the slave girl's owners. Several of those people became part of the first church in Philippi (see Acts 16:11-40).

Paul had the attitude of Jesus in all those relationships. His mindset was humility, giving up privilege to be a servant like Jesus, putting himself in positions where his service for Christ might even cost him his life. Paul was willing to do that because he was confident of the eternal life that Jesus came to make available for us all.

Jesus, who is Lord and King over all, came to give us eter-

nal life. He humbled himself and paid the price for our sin. By doing that, he made eternal life possible for all who believe in him.

Paul humbled himself and told others about Jesus so that they too would hear the good news and "acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Our attitude toward others should follow the same pattern.

Make yourself a servant to someone today, for Jesus' sake.

Lord Jesus, you are King of kings and Lord of lords. Forgive me for the times when I have not been a faithful servant to others. Bring glory to your name through me today. Amen.

DO NOT BE ANXIOUS ABOUT ANYTHING

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

Life gives us opportunities to enjoy calm and peacefulness. Life also gives us opportunities to be anxious.

We can grow anxious when sickness comes—especially when sickness might lead to death. We can also feel anxious when we run out of money for food or for our monthly bills. Relationships can create times of anxiety when tempers flare and anger burns. I remember a dark, cold, windy night when I had to walk along a lightless street to get home. I was frightened by all kinds of shifting shadows. I raced down the middle of that street as fast as I could till I was safely home.

What do you become anxious about? I heard a good sermon recently about a correlation between anxiety and prayer. When we are anxious, we can turn to the One who is aware

of all our circumstances and who will meet us in our times of anxiety. To him we pray, thanking him for who he is and telling him our anxieties. He says, “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10).

Being still gives us time to discern God and his love. I repeat the word “Father” over and over until I am at peace with God my Father. Then anxiety has its rightful place; it is in his hands, not mine. The peace of God awaits those whose hearts are set on God.

Father, Father, Father, you are God, and I am your child. Draw me to yourself today and always, helping me trust that I can leave my anxiety with you. Amen.

THE ROOT IS JESUS

We have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people. . . .
—Colossians 1:4

It's wonderful when someone comes into the kingdom of God. That person receives God's gift of grace through faith in Jesus, and they begin a new life of walking with the Holy Spirit. The new believer realizes that their old life of selfish pursuits offers nothing that will ever satisfy. They have turned their back on the darkness and are enjoying the light of the world, Jesus. Praise God for his love!

Paul is filled with thanks to hear that the people of Colossae have come to faith in Christ Jesus and are showing their love for all God's people. He even says, "We always thank God . . . when we pray for you . . ." They have become wonderful examples of living by faith in Jesus. They believe and trust, they love, and they hope in what God has already stored up in heaven for them.

Drawing all this together, we can say with Paul that the faith of the Colossian believers is rooted in Jesus Christ.

Friends, my prayer is that you will have faith in Christ Jesus; my hope for you is that in Jesus' name you are loving others, giving yourself up for them, and growing in hope in all that God has promised and is storing up for you in heaven. Stay rooted in Christ, anticipating the reality of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Gracious God in whom we hope, strengthen our faith in Jesus, the Savior of the world. Increase our love for others and build our hope in what we know is yet to come. Amen.

A BASKET OVERFLOWING

We continually ask God to fill you. . . .

—Colossians 1:9

In late August in the area where I live, it's not unusual to hear about harvesting. Harvest time is near, and what was planted in spring and cared for in summer is almost ready to fill baskets and bins.

Paul knew that the Colossians' faith, love, and hope were rooted in Christ. And that meant a bountiful harvest would come for the church. Paul said that he and others continually asked God for the Colossians to be filled to overflowing with the knowledge of God's will through the wisdom and understanding of the Holy Spirit. This knowledge is not mere head knowledge; it is heart knowledge that comes with wisdom and understanding. This involves the process of discerning the will of God, which comes through putting oneself aside and becoming filled with Jesus and the Spirit.

It is not easy to put ourselves in that position. It requires discipline, spiritual discipline. Jesus took time to be alone with his Father in order to remain focused, and we need to do the same, offering ourselves to the Father's will, not our own.

Like Jesus, we need to develop the habit of seeking after and waiting for the will of God to be revealed to us. God wants us to know his will—and, rest assured, it will always conform to what the Bible teaches.

God of bounteous grace, help us to slow down to know you and your will better, that we may live faithfully for you. Amen.

THE INVISIBLE BECOMES VISIBLE

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.
—Colossians 1:15

If a god is something or someone you trust in to guard you, provide for you, and keep you healthy, wealthy, and wise, the Colossian people had no shortage of gods. In their culture, there was a god for almost anything.

Fortunately, today we are free of those misguided ideas, right? Wrong! Look at television commercials, internet ads, highway billboards, and magazine spreads, and they will tempt you to depend on money, pearly white teeth, the right outfit, gambling, and much more. May the God of heaven help us—and he has!

Paul taught clearly that Jesus, the Son of God, is the visible image of the invisible God. He is the author of creation, the Lord of lords and King of kings. “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” All the fullness of God

is in him. Jesus made peace between God and humanity through his blood, sacrificed on the cross for the world that God has so loved since the beginning.

The Colossians needed to hear this and to believe it with such commitment that they would flee from everything else that was tempting them.

It is good for us to hear these words too—and to memorize them. Jesus is the cornerstone of our faith, and we need to remember this always, trusting in him and seeking to live for him day by day.

Lord of all, we submit ourselves to you. We confess that we often trust other things more than we want to admit. Hear our confession now, and forgive us our sins, we pray. Amen.

PERSEVERANCE

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

—James 1:2-4

When James writes that we should face trials with joy, he is talking about challenges to our faith that can help us learn and grow. He is talking about hardships we may face as believers in Christ, and how those can strengthen our faith and help us discern God's will.

For example, the first followers of Jesus were often persecuted. The apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit to preach the good news of Jesus and even to heal people in Jesus' name (Acts 2-3). And they were thrown in jail by the ruling authorities who did not believe in Jesus and his resurrection. The apostles were put on trial and asked where they got the authority to do such things. But they did not back down. Filled with the Spirit, they said, "There is no other name under

heaven . . . by which we must be saved," and, "We must obey God rather than human beings!" And even though they were punished and brutally whipped for their faith and their actions, they had joy "because they had been counted worthy of disgrace for the Name" of Christ (see Acts 4-5).

Another example can be that we are always "prepared to give an answer . . . with gentleness and respect" to explain the hope that we have in Christ. "For it is better . . . to suffer for doing good than for doing evil" (1 Peter 3:15-17).

Lord, give us the courage we need to serve you and to face trials when they come, that we may grow mature in you. Amen.

LEARNING TO SEEK AND TRUST GOD

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.
—Proverbs 3:5-6

I cannot count the times my mother quoted this verse to me—and with good reason. I was heading down a proverbial path that would only cause me disappointment or pain—yet I was too young to understand. Even though my own understanding seemed good to me at the time, I slowly learned to seek the Lord with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Sin has polluted our willingness to submit to the Lord. The devil tempts us to trust our own way and intuition. God seeks to draw us to himself because he knows best. We are constantly caught in that tug-of-war, leaning one way and then the other. There was a time when I thought I knew it all, but the one thing I did not know was that God had a better way that he was waiting to show me. God's Word taught

me to trust him with the directions.

We are taught to love the Lord God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:30-31). I need to pray this prayer more often:

Father, I have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed by what I have done and not done. I have not loved you with my heart, soul, mind, and strength; nor have I loved my neighbor as myself. Forgive me, for Jesus' sake—that I may be a cleansed servant of yours in the world. Amen.

TEST THE SPIRITS

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

—1 John 4:1

This month we have reflected on submitting to God so that we can discern how to live by his will. And here John helps us remember that we need to test all the words and voices and messages we hear “to see whether they are from God.”

False spirits and their false teachings can cause us to stray from fully depending on God. But we do not stand alone—nor should we—as we face the challenges of persevering in the faith. Alongside the Bible and the Holy Spirit, we have pastors, parents, teachers, and friends who can help us “test the spirits.” Believers in Jesus have been given communities of faith to help and encourage us—and to be ready, in turn, to receive our help as well.

Pray for your church leaders, asking that they will be faithful servants of the Lord’s people.

Give them time to wait for directions of wisdom from the Lord for Jesus’ sake. Pray with your family when decisions need to be made. Pray for school administrators and teachers, asking that they may follow the way of Jesus in their teaching and in guiding children. Pray also for government leaders, appointed by God to lead in their particular areas and regions.

Never forget that our God is Lord over all, and that Jesus is the image of the invisible God. Be humble before him and bear the fruit of the Spirit, to his honor and glory.

Lord of all, guide us to live by your wisdom, for Jesus’ sake. Fill us with your Spirit to serve for your glory. Amen.



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— BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR LIFE —

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