

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 stroke at 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.

GOOD NEWS FOR THE POOR

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. —Isaiah 61:1

We all need good news, and the best news is that we are all children of the loving God, who calls us to trust and obey him so that we can live life abundantly. God wants to save us so that we can live life forever with him. God wants this for all of us.

In these devotions we'll explore what this means, especially for people who experience poverty and hunger, who are also often oppressed, displaced, and vulnerable. That is not the way life is supposed to be. Instead, there should be abundance and flourishing for all. That is the great vision of peace and flourishing that God has for all of his creatures and all of his creation.

The Bible reminds us again and again that God has great compassion for all who are poor and oppressed, and he acts on their behalf. God also wants

his followers to love and serve these people in his name.

So let's think about how we can serve God by caring for poor and hurting people in tangible ways, from feeding and helping people to rebuild after disasters to helping with long-term development.

As we do this, we'll also be thinking about God and his heart for the poor, revealed in Jesus Christ. And this will lead us into deeper discipleship, doing justice and loving mercy in Jesus' name.

Thank you, loving God, for the Bible and for your creation, in which you reveal your heart of love and your care for all who are poor. By your Spirit, guide us to share your love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE BEGINNING OF GOOD NEWS

God created mankind in his own image. . . . God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it. . . ."
—Genesis 1:27

Good news begins right at the beginning. The good news found at the beginning of things in Genesis 1 is that there is a God who makes and upholds all that there is, and that we humans are made in the image of this amazing God.

We don't look like God, of course, for God is Spirit—but this means, among other things, that we are God's representatives. We are called to take care of all that God has made—and not just the creatures mentioned in these verses, but also the unfolding of all human history that follows, in all its complexity.

Amazing! Mere mortals are endowed with the dignity and honor of representing the infinite God, acting on God's behalf to care for his creation with all its potential. We are God's agents with a most pres-

tigious job description. And this leads us, with joy and gratitude, to a profound sense of identity and calling.

This is good news for everyone, of course—but perhaps especially for people whose sense of identity and purpose are diminished, whose ability to live joyfully and fully are held back because of poverty or anything else that hinders their participation in life. Good news for the poor begins with a reminder that they bear God's image.

Thank you, God, for creating us in your image and giving us life in your world. Help us to see your image in everyone we meet. Amen.

SHALOM!

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. . . .

—Genesis 1:31

The good, perfect, and loving Creator made an amazingly good world. The great song of creation in Genesis 1 closes with this resounding affirmation: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” The star-studded heavens, the warming sun and glistening moon, the lush forests and the underlying biosphere, the sea teeming with marine life, and the air humming with birds—all of it was good. And humankind, bearing God’s image, empowered to care for God’s good earth, was also good. It was all very good.

An important word that we will consider often this month is *shalom*. This Hebrew word, often translated as “peace,” means much more than that. While “peace” often refers mainly to an absence of conflict, *shalom* suggests the presence of goodness, flourish-

ing, right relationships, and all things being as God created them to be. *Shalom* points to all things living in line with their character so that they can fully achieve God’s intentions for them.

Living in right relationship is essential for human flourishing—right relationship with God, with others, with self, and with God’s creation. That’s what God intended. Yet because of human sin and rebellion, those relations are twisted and spoiled. Poverty and all its limitations are the result of relationships gone wrong. Even so, God’s great work of love is to free us and his creation from the bondage of sin and to restore *shalom*!

God, thank you for loving us enough to restore us and make all things new. In Jesus, Amen.

WHO ARE THE POOR?

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."

—Luke 6:20

God's concern for the poor is written all over the pages of Scripture. Nearly 500 verses in the Bible express God's concern for the needy and God's desire to act on their behalf.

But who are the poor? They are varied, and the Bible has many different words to describe them. Some people are poor because they have no money or wealth. Some are simply dependent on others. Some are poor by choice. Some are poor because of misfortune, and some are poor because of poor decisions they made. Most commonly, the poor are those who are oppressed, suffering not only material poverty but also social poverty from lack of power and opportunity. They are poor, vulnerable, and weak.

God cares for them all. The Bible teaches that God has concern not just for people

who are materially poor but also for those who are put down, oppressed, marginalized, shunned, denied opportunity, and overlooked. Again and again the Bible reveals the God who shows the poor his "tender mercies," offering himself in promises of protection and provision.

Followers of Jesus are called to imitate God's compassion, care, and mercy, lovingly assisting the poor in whatever ways are required, whether it means helping individuals, revitalizing communities, or working to create a more just and sustainable world.

Jesus, you blessed the poor with your words and your love. Teach us to do the same. Amen.

THE GOD WHO HEARS

The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out . . . to God. God heard their groaning and . . . was concerned about them.

—Exodus 2:23-25

The Israelites were the Old Testament people of God, chosen to become a nation through whom God would bless all other peoples (see Genesis 12:1-3). But, as we can see in the opening chapters of Exodus, God's chosen people were in a bad way. The people of Israel had become slaves in Egypt. And in this way, they were not able to be the blessing to others that God had promised.

The king of Egypt feared the Israelites because their numbers were a potential threat to his domain. So he made life unbearable for them until the people cried out in their slavery and suffering. Some of the deepest weeping happened because many baby boys were murdered. What trauma and hopelessness!

But finally, after seeming to be absent for a long time, God heard the people's groaning and acted to bring them freedom. It wouldn't be easy or quick, but it would be decisive and provide rescue for God's suffering people.

And isn't it startling, as we find in the next chapter, that while God was moved to help the oppressed, his first move was to call a human being, Moses, to be the agent of his liberating power?

Dear God, see and hear the groaning of people who suffer everywhere in this world. Be concerned, righteous God, and move us to be faithful to your call to act in your name. Amen!

ABUNDANCE IN THE WILDERNESS

Everyone had gathered just as much as they needed.

—Exodus 16:18

There's an old saying: "You can take a boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy." Likewise for the people of Israel, it seemed. Though they were now freed from slavery, they complained of being hungry in the desert. They grumbled that at least they had plenty of food back in Egypt.

And how did God respond? In his mercy, God provided the gift of daily bread. This was a lesson in providence to teach the people that they could trust God to care for them. God even invited them to trust him enough so that they could take a weekly day off. The Sabbath was a day to set aside toil and labor and to turn one's mind to rest, worship, and community.

Sabbath-keeping became the basis for a whole new way of thinking about life. The pattern of a weekly day of rest later

expanded to include a Sabbath year every seven years, when the land could also take a rest and debts could be forgiven. Then Sabbath years were extended so that after seven times seven (49) years there would also be a Year of Jubilee, when slaves were released, debts were forgiven, and land was returned to its original owners (Leviticus 25). These practices were meant to protect people from poverty and to show other nations that God's people could depend on him. It all has to do with trusting God and living God's way.

God of abundance, you still provide our daily bread. Receive our thanks and teach us and others that we can trust in you. Amen.

JUBILEE!

“Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.”
—Leviticus 25:10

As we noted yesterday, God’s gifts of daily bread and Sabbath invited everyone to trust in him. And God poured out abundant blessings to be shared. All of this was designed to prevent poverty. Leviticus 25 explains more about debts being forgiven, freedom for slaves, and property being restored to owners who had sold it to pay off debts. These laws reveal God’s concern for social relationships and the well-being of the community.

Imagine what it was like for people who had lost their land, or who had labored under a burden of debt, to suddenly be able to start again with a clean slate. Millions of people in poverty today long for a fresh beginning like that.

As the year 2000 approached, Christians around the world proposed a kind of modern Jubilee for low-income coun-

tries that had been burdened with crippling debt for decades. The proposals were bold and countercultural, but by God’s grace they had a measure of success. Some of the world’s poorest nations were forgiven parts of their debt. And money was freed up to build education and health-care programs.

Early in his ministry, Jesus explained that he was anointed “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,” a Jubilee—and, more than that, to fulfill that vision (Luke 4:18-19). In Jesus, we all get a chance to start over.

Lord God, your love and care for us make us long for a more just world, where new beginnings are possible. Guide us, we pray. Amen.

JESUS DESCRIBES HIS MISSION

"He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor."

—Luke 4:18

As a teacher, I have often asked my students, "Why was Jesus born?" Invariably they answer by leap-frogging over his life to his death: "Jesus was born to die so that we can be saved and one day enter heaven." And these students are often surprised when I suggest that this answer, which is correct, is also incomplete and misses a lot of good news. Jesus, I explain to them, was actually born not only to die but to live! He was born to take on the mission of bringing the kingdom of God into this world. This kingdom is marked by love for God and neighbor, justice, peace, joy, and the restoration of shalom.

In Luke 4 Jesus describes what it meant to be the Messiah (the "Anointed One"). Anointed by the Spirit, he had come to announce the presence of the kingdom of God, to speak

good news to the poor, to announce freedom for the captives, release for the oppressed, and the year of the Lord's favor, a year of Jubilee. That was his mission.

It is important to accept the gift of Jesus' offering his life for our salvation. And it is equally important to marvel at his life and to ask the Holy Spirit to anoint us too—so that we can follow him in his mission of justice and mercy.

God of grace, thank you for the gift of Jesus and the life he lived to show us the way of the kingdom of God. In his name, Amen.

MIND THE GAP

“Between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.”

—Luke 16:26

Jesus taught his followers many things about the kingdom of God. Care for the poor was high on his agenda, as we see in his parable about the rich man and Lazarus. Lazarus, a poor man, was covered with sores and was hungry. He lay outside the gate of a wealthy man who lived in luxury. But he was ignored, and his needs went unmet.

When the poor man died, he was taken to rest with Abraham, where he finally was comforted. And when the rich man died, he was consigned to Hades, where he was in torment. He pleaded for relief and begged for a warning to be sent to his brothers. Abraham explained that there was an impassable gap between them, and that the man's brothers already had all the instructions they needed.

The gap is the result of ignoring God's teachings about neighbor love and justice for the poor. These teachings are plentiful in the Bible, reminding us that God loves the poor, demands justice for them, and “upholds the cause of the needy” (Psalm 140:12).

Today about 780 million people live in poverty and suffer from hunger, disease, and vulnerability. The reasons are often complex, but the reality is simple: there is great need. God's Word still reminds us of his special care for the poor. And we have the example of Jesus to follow as we love our neighbors.

God, help us to care about the needs of the poor, as you do. Guide to show your love in Jesus' name. Amen.

UNEXPECTED GRACE

"Today salvation has come to this house. . . ."

—Luke 19:9

Zacchaeus was a needy man. He had also been greedy, growing rich as a tax collector who could pocket the extra fees he charged. As a result, his neighbors despised him. But it seems that he wanted to change. So he threw out his dignity and scrambled up a tree to see Jesus.

More importantly, Jesus saw Zacchaeus and said, "I must stay at your house today." We aren't told what else Jesus might have said in their brief exchange. But the outcome was that Zacchaeus repented and promised to give half of his possessions to the poor and to pay back four times what he had cheated anyone. What an amazing display of generosity! Imagine that!

What if every one of us who has extra money in our pocket were to give like that to help people in need? What might

that accomplish for the poor of the world? How many wells, new schools, and health clinics could we provide?

It may seem that Zacchaeus was just bubbling over with enthusiasm. But he was actually pledging to obey God's laws about economic justice (see Exodus 22; Leviticus 6). So he was not just being generous—he was being faithful and obedient. That's why Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house."

This is ultimately a story of great joy: a lost sinner is found, the poor are well served, and Jesus has a new disciple.

Lord, when I seek you sincerely, I find you seeking me. Make me faithful, serving you in the joy of salvation. Amen.

TO RAISE A VILLAGE

She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy.
—Proverbs 31:20

I once worked with a team of volunteers building a water system in a community in Honduras. The terrain was rocky, the climate was dry, and clean water was scarce. Women and girls in this area spent huge amounts of time and energy hauling water over great distances for cooking and drinking. Having a water system would make life easier and lead to better health.

Early one morning we encountered Georgina, a woman from a neighboring village who had heard about the water project. She was on fire, a force of nature! Insistently, passionately, barely pausing for breath, she told us about her community and how their well had dried up. She had been praying fervently for water, she said, and now she believed God was answering her prayers by leading her to us. Her conviction and

energy were impressive. There was no way she would take no for an answer. That day we visited her village and explained that getting water involved a lengthy and challenging process. Nothing fazed Georgina, though—and, sure enough, God answered her prayers. A year later, she and her neighbors had fresh water on tap.

It is sometimes said that it takes a village to raise a child. It could also be said that it takes a woman, like Georgina, to raise a village.

Lord, thank you for people like Georgina who trust you profoundly and serve their communities with great energy. Bless women everywhere who overcome great odds to build up their communities in Christ. Amen.

THE RIGHT TO LEARN

Mary . . . sat at the Lord's feet, listening to what he said.

—Luke 10:39

The culture that Mary and Martha lived in did not affirm a woman's right to learn—especially not from a rabbi and especially not when food had to be prepared!

But that not did not resonate with Jesus. He chided Martha and said that Mary had made the better choice. With these words and by welcoming Mary into the learning circle, Jesus broke a cultural norm, affirming the right of a woman to learn and thereby opening doors socially and economically for them as well.

There is much evidence that education is the most important thing that can help lift people out of poverty. Learning to read and write, to count, to think critically, and to acquire skills that advance employment—all of these are empowering keys that open doors to a better future.

In many communities around the world, the ones least likely to receive a life-building education are girls. More than 130 million school-age girls are not in school. That makes them more vulnerable to exploitation, limits their economic advancement, and violates their rights. That is to everyone's loss.

But thanks to a massive global effort, change is happening. Thank God that we can support organizations committed to removing barriers and creating safe spaces for girls to learn and grow in.

Jesus, your inclusion and empowering of people is inspiring. May women and girls everywhere receive education toward a better future, and may they learn about you, the greatest teacher. Amen.

WEIGH THE KIDS

“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them. . . .”

—Matthew 19:14

There’s a story about a missionary who, with his wife and children, were under house arrest in China. Then soldiers came one day and said, “You can return to America, and you can bring 200 pounds.”

They got out a scale and started weighing items to bring: books, a vase, a new typewriter. What about this? And that? They weighed and calculated, and finally they had exactly 200 pounds of luggage.

One of the soldiers asked, “Are you ready? Did you weigh everything?”

“Yes.”

“You weighed the kids?”

“No, we didn’t.”

“Weigh the kids.”

And quickly all of the stuff they had thought was important became trash.

More than a billion of the poorest people in the world today are children. That’s a sad statistic. And 20 percent of them live in so-called “developed” nations. Child poverty means lack of nutrition, vulnerability, inadequate shelter, poor health, and more. It results from many factors—lack of educational opportunities, restrictive social norms, and more. The needs of children are often overlooked when political and economic decisions are made.

Jesus loves children. He rebuked his disciples when they tried to dismiss children who were brought to him. When we “weigh the kids” by taking seriously their needs and concerns, we honor them, and we honor Jesus too.

Jesus, teach us to be more like children, and more like you. Amen.

WAYS TO HELP (1)

"He went to him and bandaged his wounds. . . ."

—Luke 10:34

A well-known proverb helps us think about different ways to respond to poverty: "Give a person a fish, and they will eat for a day. Teach them how to fish, and they will eat for a lifetime." Both approaches can be appropriate, depending on the circumstances and whether they involve short-term or long-term needs.

In the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus illustrates the "give a fish" model. The Samaritan responds compassionately and generously to the immediate needs of the wounded traveler. He bandages the man's wounds and doesn't concern himself, for now, with whether the roadway should have better security!

Sometimes a bandage is what is needed. When winter temperatures in our city plunge far below freezing and home-

less shelters beg for mittens and socks, that's a need calling for an immediate solution. Similarly, when a cyclone tears up a community in Bangladesh and people are left homeless and without food and water, short-term relief is vital for saving lives.

I thank God for the generosity of people everywhere who respond to needs that arise from natural disasters. And yet bandages, while necessary, are temporary. Compassion for the poor and a commitment to overcome poverty can require more.

Lord, like the Samaritan, we long to show love to our neighbors in need. Help us to be generous and wise in the opportunities you present to us. In Christ, Amen.

WAYS TO HELP (2)

“Go, sell the oil and pay your debts. You and your sons can live on what’s left.”
—2 Kings 4:7

The widow’s dilemma can be as real today as it was in Elisha’s time. She faced poverty and exploitation, hopelessness and despair. Notice that Elisha responded to this crisis by engaging her in finding a sustainable income to support herself and her sons.

Yesterday we affirmed the importance of meeting immediate needs. But we also know that bigger problems often call for more sustainable solutions.

Elisha’s response to the widow respects her abilities, invites her participation, engages her neighbors, and transforms her “nothing but a little oil” into a cottage industry to support her family.

While bandages have their uses, new skills, knowledge, and opportunities are needed to help people find new be-

ginnings and pathways out of poverty.

I thank God for the many organizations and people who are “teaching people to fish” by teaching sustainable agriculture, nutrition, and health care, literacy and numeracy skills, leadership and human rights—and who do all that as an expression of God’s love and his desire for abundant life for all people.

Have you considered supporting such important work?

Dear God, the suffering of the poor who bear your image is an affront to you. You long for their renewal and flourishing. Use me as you will to help change the story in their lives. In Christ, Amen.

WAYS TO HELP (3)

"Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night?"
—Luke 18:7

In the Bible widows represent the most vulnerable members of society. In Jesus' parable here, the widow is in need because people in power do not care about her need for justice. In terms of our "fish proverb," she does not need a "fish"; nor does she need to be taught "how to fish." She is being denied her rights, and she is deprived of an "opportunity to fish."

We may sometimes imagine that people are poor because of some inadequacy on their part. Maybe we think they don't work hard enough, or they aren't sufficiently motivated. But that would probably be a mistake. Most poor people I've encountered work harder than I've ever worked and are highly motivated. Their poverty is a consequence of injustice. In other words, someone has stolen their "fish-

ing gear" or blocked access to their "fishing pond." People in such circumstances don't need a "fish" or a "fishing lesson"; they need justice.

Justice in this sense means empowerment, access, participation in decision making, respect for human rights, and advocacy. Biblical justice is about healing relationships that are broken and twisted, whether they are personal and local, or global and systemic.

God has promised to bring about justice for those who cry out to him. Should we cry out on their behalf?

Dear God, help me to see what justice should look like in my life and community. Make me an instrument of your shalom. Amen.

WORSHIP THAT COUNTS

“Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.”

—Isaiah 1:17

Poverty is often caused by injustice. While justice occurs where relationships are “just right,” injustice happens when relationships are broken. Injustice includes the misuse of power, exploitation of the weak, denial of basic rights, valuing money more than people, and self-indulgence in the face of human suffering. It can take many forms. It can be personal or societal.

One thing we know for sure is that God hates injustice because it harms his children, whom he loves. Through the prophet Isaiah, God shows that even our best worship can be distasteful to him if we do not practice justice. Injustice makes our religious practices unacceptable to God. Prayers, songs, lavish worship services—they are all meaningless if we do not do justice.

The role of prophets was to call people back to faithful living, to repent of their unjust practices, to embrace justice as a lifestyle. Isaiah talks about seeking justice, defending the oppressed, and speaking up for the fatherless and the widow, and in chapter 58 he adds that we should share our food with the hungry, provide shelter to the poor wanderer, and more. The prophet Micah says we should “act justly,” “love mercy,” and “walk humbly” with God (Micah 6:8).

The good news is that God accepts our repentance and transforms us to do justice out of joyful service to him.

God, we know that you want us to be just. By your grace, restore and renew us to seek justice for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

WHERE IS JESUS?

"I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. . . ."

—Matthew 25:35

The Russian author Leo Tolstoy wrote a story about Martin the cobbler.

One evening Martin hears the Lord speak to him, saying that he will come to Martin's shop the next day. Martin is filled with expectation, and as the day goes by, he watches and waits anxiously. While he is waiting for the Lord, he notices an old soldier suffering from the cold and invites him in to share a cup of tea. Soon a struggling young mother comes by, and he fits her shoeless child with a warm pair of boots and gives her some coins for food. He defends a poor young boy caught trying to steal an apple.

By the day's end, he is disappointed that he has not yet met the Lord. But then a voice comes to him, saying, "Martin, did you not recognize me?" And then he sees the soldier and the mother and boy, and

Martin understands: Jesus has appeared to him through the encounters with people he has helped throughout the day.

Tolstoy's story is inspired by his reading of Matthew 25. Here we learn that God identifies with the poor so completely that an act of kindness done to them is considered by God to be an act of kindness done to him. When we remember that each person is a child of God bearing God's image, we too will recognize Jesus in the faces and lives of the people we meet.

Lord, you have made yourself visible to me in the faces of friends and strangers alike. Forgive me when I am too short-sighted to notice, and help me to keep my eyes open. Amen.

SURPRISE!

"Lord, when did we see you hungry . . . ?"

—Matthew 25:37, 44

Jesus' parable about sheep and goats teaches us that he is present among the poor, sick, imprisoned, strangers, outcasts, and others who may be disadvantaged. He identifies with these people so closely that an act of kindness done to them is one done to him. And the "reward" for caring for these people is to be welcomed into the kingdom of God.

A wonderful feature of this parable is the absolute surprise of the sheep when they hear the good news of their welcome. They don't expect it. When the King tells them that by caring for these people they have fed, clothed, and visited him, they are astonished. When did we see you hungry or naked or thirsty? In other words, we only saw other humans in need and were happy to serve them simply because they were human, not because

we thought it would bring us any reward. We did it because it was the right thing to do.

The goats, on the other hand, are equally surprised. They hear that they will *not* receive their inheritance because they neglected the people in need. Their response suggests that because they did *not* see the King among those people, the poor and others in need were not worthy of their care and attention.

Blessed are all who bless the poor and outcast and all others in need with kindness, food, clothing, and more without *expecting* to be rewarded.

Lord, forgive me if I withhold acts of mercy and kindness because I think people are undeserving. Guide me to show your love and generosity. Amen.

EXPOSED

I know my transgressions. . . .

—Psalm 51:3

When the COVID-19 pandemic started, everyone became more aware of the meaning of *exposure*. Exposure to the deadly virus was bad, something to be avoided. People didn't want to be exposed.

But this virus turned out to be not only something we could be exposed *to*, but also something we could be exposed *by*. COVID-19 has exposed some troubling realities about our world that tended to be overlooked before. For example, excessive numbers of infections and deaths occurred in long-term care facilities, not just because elderly residents were more susceptible but also because "essential" staff, often ethnic minority workers, were underpaid and needed more than one job, making them more likely to spread the virus. Ethnic minorities also tend

to have higher mortality rates because they have limited access to medical assistance. And from a more global view, wealthy nations have a surplus of vaccines while low-income nations have to deal with limited availability of vaccines. In these ways, some of our shortcomings and misplaced priorities in society and in global concerns have been exposed.

Biblically speaking, exposure can be a good thing, though, because it makes clear that we need to seek God's mercy, to repent, receive forgiveness, and be restored. That's good news in rough packaging!

O God, we are constantly exposed before you. Help us all to learn from reality checks like the pandemic so that by your grace we can be renewed. In Christ, Amen.

GOOD NEWS OR BAD?

"He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty."
—Luke 1:53

Mary's song speaks of a great reversal and disruption! The proud are brought low, and the humble poor are lifted up. Hungry folks are filled, and the rich are emptied. Does that scare you?

Some people have wondered, Does this mean that God has favorites? Does God love the poor more than the rich? God loves everyone, right?

God makes clear that he loves the poor and is deeply concerned about them. Hundreds of Scripture passages testify to God's concern for the poor and oppressed and his intentions to uphold their cause.

Actually, God loves both the poor *and* the rich—but not *because* they are poor or rich. God loves them because they are his children and he wants everyone to flourish.

God wants the poor to be able to live into the fullness of their identity and vocation. He focuses on them like a firefighter on a burning house. God promises to help the poor and relieve their suffering.

God calls the rich to the fullness of their humanity too. He warns them against the dangers of greed, the temptations of excessive wealth, and the sins of ignoring or abusing the poor. These vices interfere with discipleship and contribute to poverty. These warnings are expressions of grace.

God loves all of us and calls us to live in obedience to his sovereign rule. That's how we get to shalom.

God, thank you for your care and provisions, and give us the grace to live like Jesus, who became poor for the sake of us all. Amen.

HUNGRY EYES

The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time.
—Psalm 145:15

One of the most heartbreaking scenes that I remember from living and working in Bangladesh was when I saw a couple of children, who were obviously malnourished and hungry, staring at pictures of delicious food in a glossy magazine they had found in the garbage. One of the children lifted the magazine to her mouth and licked a picture of an ice-cream cone.

We were there to help alleviate hunger and its cause—poverty—but I felt incredibly helpless and useless in the face of such misery. I groaned a lament based on Psalm 145: “Lord, *when* will you give them their food? Is *now* not the proper time?”

Since those days in the early 1990s, the number of people who experience hunger and food insecurity has declined as poverty alleviation programs

have increased. I am grateful for that and for organizations that have led the charge. But those children still haunt me, as they should, because today hunger is again on the rise. More than 780 million people will go to bed hungry tonight. Each one matters to God. Each one must matter to us.

When I pray for them, as I must, I know that God has called me to be part of the answer to my own prayer.

O God, we lament the reality of poverty and hunger that causes so much suffering among the people you love. We know that each one matters to you. We pray for your mercy in their lives, and we ask that you use us for your purposes. In Christ, Amen.

CREATION GROANS

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth. . . .
—Romans 8:22

The creation has been groaning, says the apostle Paul in Romans 8. We have all been distressed by news of natural disasters around the world. Wildfires, droughts, floods, hurricanes, cyclones, blistering heat waves! God's good creation, designed to function beautifully and predictably as our dwelling place, suffers under the curse of sin.

The groaning of creation is echoed in the groaning of people whose lives are affected by extreme weather events: subsistence farmers who wait in vain for rain; coastal people whose land erodes under their feet; refugees in tent cities who cannot escape rains that have swept their homes away; farmers who watch floodwaters destroy their life's work; whole communities that have to evacuate their homes to flee firestorms.

As always, the impact is greatest on people who are most vulnerable, living on the edge of survival. Many gains made against global poverty in the past decades are being undone by climate events.

The Bible teaches that God loves his creation, summons it to sing forth his praises, and gives it to us for our care and enjoyment. Our sin has spoiled creation, but God promises that creation itself will be "liberated from its bondage to decay" and brought into freedom!

Let's live in a way that shows we care for God's creation—for the sake of all people and especially our Savior!

Creator God, help us to live in the hope of your liberation for us and for our home, the earth. In Jesus, Amen.

PASSING THROUGH THE WATERS

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. . . ."

—Isaiah 43:2

These words about passing through waters had a special meaning for the people of Israel. When they fled from Egypt, they came to the impassable Red Sea, and it seemed they would be trapped by the pursuing Pharaoh and his army. But God miraculously opened a way so that they could cross on dry land (Exodus 14). Later they also crossed the Jordan River on dry ground to enter the promised land (Joshua 3-4). So the idea of passing through waters became a shorthand way of saying that God would watch over them through all kinds of adversity.

These words have special meaning for the people of Satkhira in southern Bangladesh. They live on a huge flood plain near the world's largest mangrove forest. They often experience cyclones and storm surges

that cause massive flooding. Rising sea levels are also flooding miles of rice paddies with saltwater, destroying farmland, displacing families, and leading to economic hardship, food insecurity, and climate refugees.

As these folks "pass through the waters," they are not alone but are being accompanied by Christian organizations who help them learn new skills, find new employment, and adapt their farming techniques. And they are learning to trust God.

All of us can trust God in the storms and challenges of life. He is right there with us.

God, grant your mercy in the lives of everyone facing challenges. As you promise, be with us all as we "pass through the waters." Amen.

SPRINGS OF LIVING WATER

"I will make rivers flow on barren heights, and springs within the valleys."
—Isaiah 41:18

Quebrada Honda is a village in Honduras. The name means, literally, "deep creek." When our team of volunteers came to build a water system, there was no creek in sight. The riverbed was dried up and dusty. Drinking water was either hauled in for a high fee or carried a long distance by women and children. There were no household vegetable gardens because there was no water for growing produce.

That was a few years ago. Since then a water system has been constructed to bring water to a faucet at every home and smiles of joy to every face. Everyone has access to drinking water; laundry can be done at home; and splashy baths are frequent!

Abundant vegetables are growing there also—not just in gardens but also in aquaponic tanks, where the water is *alive*

with both vegetables and fish. Living water to sustain living people!

The Bible makes many references to living water, promising springs in the desert and rivers whose streams bring gladness. There are waters of cleansing, waters of healing, and waters that refresh dry and thirsty lives.

Jesus said that all who are thirsty can come to him for *living water* and never thirst again (John 4:13; 7:37-38). Doesn't that sound good? Doesn't that sound like something you need? Ask him today, and discover the deep joy of knowing him.

Bountiful God, thank you for providing water for our bodies and living water for our souls. Fill our cup, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

REDEEMED!

Praise the LORD . . . who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion. . . . —Psalm 103:2-4

Her name was Shapla, and I could see the fear in her teenage eyes. When strangers came to her village in rural Bangladesh, she feared they would take her away. This had happened to her sister. Shapla's family was very poor; they had become indebted to a ruthless moneylender. Her sister had been "traded" to pay some of the debt, but part of the debt remained.

These new visitors, however, had come to help launch a village savings and loan program. This would help Shapla's parents and their neighbors to save money and take low-interest loans so that they could buy seed and fertilizer to grow healthy crops. This new venture would also put the local moneylender out of business and free Shapla's family from their debt to him. They were "redeemed" from that debt.

In the Bible redemption is not only a spiritual concept but also a practice by which one person can "redeem" another by paying a price. The book of Ruth tells a story about that. Similarly, Shapla's family was redeemed of their debt by the intervention of their village savings and loan program.

Ultimately, of course, only God can redeem us from sin and guilt, and he graciously does this through the precious gift of Jesus, who gave his life so that we can live with him.

Dear God, thank you for redeeming us in Jesus Christ. And thank you for programs that liberate people from crippling debt. With our whole being we praise you, Lord! In Christ, Amen.

LOOKING FOR A HOME

I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge. . . ."

—Psalm 91:2

It was a scene of great joy when three siblings and their family members were reunited after a long separation. Seeking safety, they had fled their homeland in the midst of a civil war, and for eight long years they had lived in different refugee camps, moving from one place to another and searching for each other. Now, in a crowded airport, they were finally reunited. Our church, responsible for their resettlement, had provided housing, but it would not be "home" until the arrival of their loved ones.

Home is supposed to mean safety, belonging, and welcome. But for millions of people their home region has become dangerous and unwelcoming. War, violence, discrimination, and even natural disasters have forced millions to leave their homes. Some get to start a new life. Others lan-

guish, homeless and growing hopeless.

Baby Jesus was a refugee when his family fled to Egypt to escape death (Matthew 2). He later said that he had nowhere to rest his head. He understands the pain and sorrow of a refugee.

God has great concern for refugees. Psalm 68 says that God will give the desolate a home, and in Isaiah 65 we read of a "new" time when people can build houses and stay in them. More than that, God offers the deep shelter of belonging to him—under his wings we find refuge.

Heavenly Father, we give thanks for our homes. Please care for the homeless. Thank you for being our dwelling place. In Jesus, Amen.

A HOPEFUL VISION

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"
—Revelation 21:5

Have you ever wondered what the future will be like? I do. I wonder if doomsday forecasts will come true or whether we will find pathways toward a better future. If I look only to myself and what I know now, I am not always especially hopeful. Some problems seem impossible to solve, and reasons to feel gloomy abound.

But God gives us many good reasons to be hopeful. First, God loves his creation, including us. God sent his Son to redeem us and to show us a better way of life, the kingdom way. God offers us forgiveness and new life: more than pardon, this is the gift of a new future made possible through Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul says that when we are "in Christ," the old is gone and the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). And in Revelation 21:5

we read that God is "making everything new."

Isaiah paints a picture of God's new future in very practical terms. People will live long. Infant mortality will be gone. People will stay in their own homes. They will reap the rewards of their labor, not toiling merely for the benefit of others. There will be peace—so much so that even natural enemies will cooperate.

That's a beautiful picture of the future into which God invites us already today.

Lord, help us to do justice, love mercy, trust Jesus, and follow him. Help us to enter your good future. Give us hope as we participate and invite others. Amen.

HOPE'S TWO DAUGHTERS

Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. . . . Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. . . .

—Romans 12:9-12

The people I've met who live in poverty have needed many different things: housing, new skills, friendship, advocacy. And the one thing they have all needed is hope, the sense that life is still full of possibilities. Hope convicts us that the world-as-it-is is not the world-as-it-can-be. Christians are above all a people of hope—and this does not refer to wishful thinking or naïve optimism but hope as “resurrection thinking and living.” In Jesus Christ, God has assured us that the future is open to God's grace.

St. Augustine said that hope has two daughters: “Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are.” Because God desires shalom for the whole creation, we are right to be angry at poverty and all that interferes with shalom. “Hate what is evil,” says

Paul. Indifference or apathy about injustice, oppression, and the suffering of others cannot produce hope.

But anger by itself cannot bring positive change. Anger at evil must be accompanied by courage to act in ways that overcome evil. Paul describes that hopeful courage as consisting of patience, sharing both joys and sorrows, showing hospitality, bearing each other's burdens, and more.

Some of the poorest folks I have met are also the most hopeful. They are wise enough to hate evil and determined enough to face each day with courage. Theirs will be the kingdom of heaven.

Lord, teach me to long for a world of justice and peace, and use me to do your will. Amen.

LIKE BOWLING

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

—James 2:17

If you have ever gone bowling, you know that the real value of a strike lies in what follows. A strike by itself is worth 10 points, but the real benefit lies in the pins you knock down in the next two throws. Throwing well could make that first strike worth 30 points!

The life of faith and discipleship is something like that. Following up is all-important. It is one thing to hear the gospel, and it is quite another to embrace the gospel fully and be transformed by it. It is wonderful to receive forgiveness, and yet a richer blessing awaits all who extend that forgiveness to others. It is a joy to be welcomed into the family of God, and even greater joy comes with inviting and welcoming others.

The good deeds that James is talking about are "follow-up throws" that multiply and ex-

pand the gift of faith—so much so that failing to follow up can render that faith lifeless.

We've been reflecting on God's heart for the poor and what that means for us. *Learning* about poverty is one thing. *Believing* that we are called to compassionate service is another. And *following up* with action for the poor and others in need makes knowing and believing genuine.

After all, what good does it do a hungry person if all you give are caring thoughts and words?

God, we thank you for teaching us in your Word and showing us in Jesus how to live. Make our faith alive in good deeds for Jesus' sake. Amen.

A NEW SONG

"Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things. . . ."
—Psalm 98:1

Hearing the invitation to "sing a new song," I've written one. These lyrics go with the tune for "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." To God be all glory, honor, and praise!

In Christ Jesus God befriends us, comes to meet us in our need;

by his wounded flesh Christ heals us, from the powers sets us free.

With a shepherd's eyes he finds us; in his arms we are embraced.

Through his teaching we learn wisdom, at the cross we meet God's grace.

God brings help for those who struggle, and relief from poverty

when we act with love toward strangers, risk ourselves to set them free;

lay the walls of hate to rubble till the cries of war are ceased;

when the rich in generous measure share with those who have the least.

Creeds cannot dispel the hunger that brings children to their knees,

nor can weekly rites of worship ease the pain of dread disease.

Only love, made real in service, reaches others in their need;

Holy Spirit, move our faith from holy words to holy deeds.

All my neighbors, near and distant, must enjoy God's friendship too.

They are waiting to be welcomed to the feast where life's made new.

Let us join our hands together, raise our voices, shout our prayers;

live the life that Christ commands us till there's justice everywhere.



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