



Nov/Dec 2019

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

*Jesus'
Family*

ALSO: QUESTIONS IN THE BIBLE

Friends:

Years ago I had a lot of questions about where my family came from. We had a death certificate for a great-grandfather, but that was as far back as I knew. So I began researching my genealogy. I built a family tree, and—person by person, document by document—the story of how my family immigrated (not once, but twice!) emerged. I came to know a lot about my family history.



On hearing my story, others began to ask for help. Could I help them discover their story? Could we fill out their tree? Could we find half-forgotten branches? Could we find a birth father fifty years after an adoption? Genealogy has been a fascinating way to help people discover how they came to be where they are.

Two of the four gospels include genealogies for Jesus because it's important for us to see where Jesus of Nazareth came from. The whole Bible tells the story of how God worked in people's lives to bring about his Messiah, the Savior, Christ Jesus.

This December, John Van Schepen considers Jesus' family tree. We'll explore the stories of people who came before and how they were woven into the bigger story of how God saves his people in Jesus.

But first, in November, Norman Brown walks us through some of the many questions we find in the Bible. Scripture is full of answers, of course, and yet it is also full of questions—big and small. Together let's wonder aloud as we explore the Word of God.

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

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Steven Koster". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Steven" and last name "Koster" clearly distinguishable.

—Steven Koster

Today

Nov/Dec 2019

refresh, refocus, renew



"Questions in the Bible"
Norman Brown



"Jesus' Family"
John Van Schepen

Managing Editor: Jeff Bulthuis
Executive Editor: Steven Koster

TODAY (USPS 185-140),
Volume 69, Number 6,
published bimonthly by
ReFrame Media, a division
of Back to God Ministries
International, at 1700 28th
Street SE, Grand Rapids, MI
49508-1407. Periodicals
postage paid at Grand Rapids,
Michigan, and at additional
mailing offices.

Postmaster: Send address changes
to Today, 1700 28th Street SE,
Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407.

Copyright © 2019, Back to
God Ministries International.
Printed in U.S.A.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture
quotations in this publication
are from The Holy Bible, New
International Version®, NIV®.
Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984,
2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by
permission. All rights reserved
worldwide.

Cover photo: Lightstock



ReFrame
Media

november

Questions in the Bible

Norman Brown

Someone has said there are more than 2,400 questions in the Bible. God asked many of them, including the one in which he asks Adam, "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9). Other questions challenge God: "How long will you hide your face from me?" (Psalm 13:1). Or they ask in wonder, "Where can I go from your Spirit? (Psalm 139:7). In amazement, Jesus' followers ask, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!" (Mark 4:41). And he questions them: "Who do you say I am?" (Mark 8:29).

All of these questions are included in Scripture to help us engage in our relationship with God. This month we will reflect on some of the many questions in the Bible, and we pray that the reflections here will draw you into the Word of God, to explore how we relate to the Lord our Creator, Savior, and King.

Chaplain Norman F. Brown served nearly 20 years as an active-duty U.S. Navy chaplain. He also served as a pastor to churches in Michigan, Connecticut, Maryland, and New Jersey. After retiring in 2012, Norman and Ruth, his wife of 50 years, moved to Massachusetts near one of their daughters. They are grateful to God for their three married children and ten grandchildren.

WHERE ARE YOU?

The LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"

—Genesis 3:9

"Where are you?" God asks Adam. This question is not about where Adam and Eve are hiding. Something bigger than that is happening here.

Genesis 1 and 2 give the glorious account of our creative God creating everything—including us human beings. Then Genesis 3 tells of Adam and Eve's disobedience, their fall into sin, which now infects all of us. The fruit looked delicious and desirable, but all it revealed was that they were naked. They tried to hide from God in their shame, making simple garments of fig leaves. Where were they? To answer God's question, they were lost.

God's footsteps echoed in the garden, and his voice boomed, "Where are you?" God knew, but *they* needed to know they were lost.

"Who told you that you were naked?" God asked. Like naughty children, they tried the blame game. "The woman you put here gave me the fruit," whimpered Adam. "The serpent (you made) fooled me," Eve whined.

Today God still asks, "Where are you?" I heard it when I was in college; I was lost, vulnerable, and scared. God pursued me into my wilderness, where the haunting question suddenly turned comforting. He wasn't out to get me into trouble but to give me the promise that he'd provided a Savior, his Son. "Stay where you are. I've sent my Son for you!" God assured me. Do you know this God, who desires to be with you?

Loving God, chase me
and grace me with new
life, fully clothed in Jesus'
righteousness. I am found!
And I praise you! Amen.

DID GOD REALLY SAY . . . ?

The serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say . . . ?"
—Genesis 3:1

The serpent asked a provocative question that led Adam and Eve into temptation: "Did God *really* say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" Eve replied, "He said we could eat from all the trees except for the one in the center, and if we did, we would die!" Then the serpent contradicted God: "You will not die! Instead, you will be like God!"

That's how "that ancient serpent [who is] called the devil, or Satan" led "the whole world astray" (Revelation 12:9). Eve ate some of the fruit, and she gave some to Adam, and he ate it. In one way Satan was right: after eating the fruit, they didn't choke to death immediately. But their souls were fatally poisoned. And we are all caught in the same trap.

Can you relate to Adam and Eve? Satan still whispers se-

ductively, "Did God *really* say [your temptation] is bad or wrong?" This warning still applies: "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8).

If we're not careful, we'll find ourselves lost, naked, and ashamed in our personal wilderness, vainly trying to escape God's all-seeing gaze. Thankfully, his great love for us in Christ wins the day. God's hope-filled question from Eden reaches us today: "Where are you?" When Satan whispers, listen not to him but the Father, look to the Savior, and trust the Spirit to overcome.

Sovereign God, when we are tempted, help us to hear you calling us to follow Jesus' way. Amen.

WHAT IS THIS YOU HAVE DONE?

The LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?"
—Genesis 3:13

"Confession is good for the soul." This is not a biblical proverb, but it flows from the Bible's teaching. God's question to Eve resonates with every sinner's soul: "What is this you have done?" Her answer is history's first confession of sin: "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." She knew that God knew. No use denying it.

After Eve's confession, God issued judgment on the serpent (Satan), on human beings, and on creation because of human sin. The serpent would slither in the dust and later be crushed by Eve's offspring (when Jesus conquered sin and death for us—Romans 8:1-4). Childbirth, the woman's unique privilege, would include severe pain, yet she would still desire her husband. And farming, humanity's high calling in caring for God's creation, would now include backbreaking work to produce

the food people had to eat. Then eventually their bodies would die and return to the dust they had come from.

But in an act of grace, God clothed his imagebearers with animal hides. And he evicted them from Eden—not as punishment but to protect them from living forever in sin and separation from God.

Salvation requires confession. Like Adam and Eve, we all sin. The question God asked Eve needs to be answered daily so that we can grow in grace. "What is this you have done?" An honest answer will be good for the soul.

Father, we have disobeyed you in this life you have given us. Forgive us, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

AM I MY BROTHER'S KEEPER?

"I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

—Genesis 4:9

My kid brother died years ago. It was heartbreaking. Unlike Cain, I hadn't killed my brother, but Cain's question to God exploded in my soul. Suddenly I knew the answer: "Yes, I *am* my brother's keeper." I'd wanted to protect my little brother.

After leaving Eden, Adam and Eve had two sons: Cain, a crop farmer, and Abel, a shepherd. Eventually Cain offered some fruits of the soil to God while Abel offered the choicest parts from the firstborn of his flock. God honored Abel's gift but not Cain's. So Cain got angry.

God warned Cain to control his anger, to do what was right, and to prevent sin—lurking at his door—from devouring him (1 Peter 5:8). But instead Cain killed Abel.

"Where's your brother Abel?" God asks. And Cain unwisely

responds, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

As a Navy chaplain, I learned that shipmates care for one another. That was all God was asking of Cain—like "At the very least, do no harm!" So it should be for us.

Kneel today at the foot of Jesus' cross, where "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us" (2 Corinthians 5:21), to save us from sin and death. In his strength, we can obey Jesus: love the Lord your God, your neighbor, one another, and even your enemies (Matthew 22:36-40; John 13:34-35; Matthew 5:43-48). We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers.

Father, you give us brothers and sisters so that we can care for them. Guide us to do as you ask. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WILL NOT THE JUDGE . . . DO RIGHT?

"Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike."

—Genesis 18:25

Abraham pleads for Sodom, asking God not to destroy that corrupted city if some righteous people might still be there. And God says he will hold back if just ten are found. Abraham seems unsure at first, but he speaks out in faith, stating that surely God is just and would not destroy the righteous along with the wicked.

Abraham's question is rhetorical: "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" And, of course, God will. But God also listens to Abraham and assures him. Sadly, though, not even ten righteous people lived in Sodom—and yet, before disaster struck, God also rescued Abraham's nephew Lot and his family members who were living there (Genesis 19:1-29).

Now, what about natural disasters and human calamities that take many lives? Are those

about God's judgment too? Jesus raised that question as he talked about people who had died when a tower collapsed: "Do you think they were more guilty than all the others" in that area? "I tell you, no!" Disasters like that are part of the brokenness of this world. But Jesus also warned his listeners: this doesn't mean the people who survive a disaster are without sin. In fact, all of us need the Savior. (See Luke 13:1-5.)

In all kinds of situations in life, God calls us to recognize that we are sinners. We all need the Savior, Jesus, who died for our sake and rose again to make new life possible for us. "Do you believe this?" (John 11:26).

O God, thank you for your mercy and grace in the saving work of Christ. Amen.

WHY DO YOU ASK MY NAME?

Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

—Genesis 32:29

A strange wrestling match took place one night at the Jabbok River. Jacob had been preparing to meet with his twin brother, Esau, on the next day. It would be Jacob's first visit with Esau since running away after stealing his brother's birthright (Genesis 27).

But on this night, Jacob wrestled in the dark with someone he couldn't see. We aren't told much about this wrestler, but we know he struggled with Jacob till dawn, and their match ended as a draw until the opponent wrenched Jacob's hip.

Jacob held on, though, saying, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." And the wrestler gave Jacob a new name, *Israel*, which means "he struggles with God." This name fit Jacob well, for he had a long history of struggling to choose right from wrong (see Genesis

27-35). It was often difficult for Jacob to try to live God's way.

Like Jacob, we too struggle with God. And yet, despite trying to go our own way, we are blessed. God comes to bless us who have tried to scheme our way into life's blessings. He confronts us, but instead of giving us what we deserve, he grants salvation and life.

Jacob ended up with a limp from his encounter. Do we have scars from our wrestling with God? Maybe not visible ones, but we know there is One who bears the scars of laying down his life for us: the Lord and Savior, Jesus (John 20:24-29). Do you know him?

Lord Jesus, thank you for fighting to redeem and restore us to be all you have called us to be. Amen.

WILL THEY LIVE AGAIN?

"If someone dies, will they live again?"

—Job 14:14

Job was an upright, wealthy, married father of ten children. Then God let Satan take away all of Job's livestock, his children, and even his health. Job mourned deeply, and his wife challenged him, saying, "Curse God and die!" But Job did not do that. (See Job 1-2.)

Later Job's friends came to "comfort" him. But they tried to blame him for the troubles he was facing (Job 4-11). In the midst of his thinking about all this, Job asked, "If someone dies, will they live again?" As a pastor and Navy chaplain, I've been asked that question. How would you answer it?

Christians believe and trust the Bible's teaching about Jesus' resurrection, and he appeared many times to his followers after rising from the dead. He greeted the women at the tomb, visited his disciples in

locked rooms (Matthew 28; John 20), and met many others.

But Job had no proofs; he only had faith—and some questions for God. He asked, "If someone dies, will they live again?" and he waited for "renewal to come." Job knew something: "My offenses will be sealed up in a bag; you will cover over my sin." It seems Job was talking about not just life after death but also renewed hope for life *before* death. And God assured him of that, eventually blessing Job again later (Job 42:12-17).

Today, we can be even more assured than Job, for we have the blessing of the risen Christ!

O God, thank you for raising Jesus not only to show us there is life after death but also to give us new life before death. Help us to truly live! In Jesus, Amen.

WHERE WERE YOU . . . ?

"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand."
—Job 38:4

After Job's friends have had their say and Job himself has asked many questions, God breaks his silence with a booming command: "Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me."

This reminds me of some experiences at the Naval Academy, especially when first-year cadets begin learning. "Brace up!" And we did! "Attention!"

God is not threatening Job. Rather, God is addressing Job like the man of God he created and called him to be. "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?" God's opening question is really a statement. He is telling Job who and whose he is: an imagebearer of his Maker (Genesis 1:26-27). God's question both humbles and honors Job.

God's monologue in chapters 38-41 gives no defense of

why God allowed Job's trials by Satan, and it gives no comment about Job's strong faith. God simply takes Job on a grand verbal tour of his creation, sharing its glory with Job and implying how much he thinks of his imagebearer.

Job came to see what we know today: God in Christ Jesus has dignified us by walking with us through his creation, empowering us to treat every other imagebearer we encounter with God-honoring dignity.

"Brace yourself!" Enjoy God's company today! He asks, "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand." And now we can understand!

Lord, thank you for honoring us with your image. Guide us to live like Jesus each day, we pray. Amen.

WHAT IS MANKIND . . . ?

When I consider your heavens . . . what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?

—Psalm 8:3-4

Our firstborn arrived one week before I was set to sail on a destroyer to Vietnam. After just seven days for me to bond, our ship got under way. At times in the midst of duty it was hard to remember I had become a dad.

God the Father, on the other hand, always has us on his mind. “What is mankind that you are mindful of them . . . ?” Though we don’t often act like it, we humans are at the top of creation’s glory. “God created mankind in his own image . . . male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). But then their sin scarred his image in them. It wasn’t obliterated, but it was definitely damaged.

I’ve been awestruck by the rugged beauty of the Scottish Highlands, the fury of New England nor’easters, and the infinite inventory of stars at night

on the high seas. Yet every imagebearing child reveals more of God’s glory. Creation bears God’s fingerprints; we bear his very likeness.

The psalmist’s question is profoundly humbling and wondrously uplifting: “What is mankind that you are mindful of them . . . ?” We are each made in the image of God. And though the rebellion of sin reverberates in our daily lives, God still sees his likeness in us. His Son came to redeem and restore us. We are “growing in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:10). What a blessing it is that God is mindful of his imagebearers!

Lord, we confess our sin that so terribly mars your image in us. Thank you for redeeming and restoring us in Jesus. Amen.

WILL YOU FORGET ME FOREVER?

How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?
—Psalm 13:1

The captain of the destroyer I served on during the Vietnam War sent me home several weeks early for training. The ship's schedule required dropping me off at an Air Force base in the Philippines a week before my flight out. Knowing no one there, I faced a lonely wait. In some ways I felt God-forgotten, if not God-forsaken.

David the psalmist had feelings of God-forgottenness. He had times of being surrounded by enemies. He wrote of the aloneness one can feel when it seems God has turned away and the enemy is at the gate.

In the Philippines, I wondered, "Has God lost track of me way over here?" It could have been an opportunity for the enemy to gain the upper hand! I decided to do what I knew to do: worship. That evening I braved the unknown and went to the

base chapel's Sunday-evening service.

After the benediction, friendly folks greeted me. That week, Air Force Christians became a young Naval officer's friends. God hadn't overlooked or forgotten me. He'd answered my prayer. How long, Lord? *"Just long enough to assure you I'm near, but never too long."*

If it seems God has forgotten you, follow David's example in worship today: call on the Lord, trust his unfailing love, rejoice in his salvation, and sing praises for his goodness—even if you don't feel like it.

Lord, at times it can feel as if you've forgotten us and we're abandoned. Then you let us know we're always in your love. Reassure us today. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

—Psalm 22:1

Psalm 22 asks one of history's most haunting questions. We don't know if King David of Israel experienced the scenes here in his life or perhaps in a dream or vision, but several parts of this psalm accurately portray the crucifixion of Jesus, the Son of God, who was also a descendant of David.

When I first read this psalm as a new Christian, I was astonished. I could see why Christ exclaimed the opening line of Psalm 22 while he hung dying on the cross (Mark 15:34).

Jesus was no unwitting victim of a Jewish-Roman conspiracy. He had led a parade into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:1-11) before a cheering, hopeful crowd, only to disappoint them by week's end. Then he surrendered to his captors' sham trial, endured his disciples' abandonment, and suffered death by crucifixion. His singular complaint was,

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

We can understand why Jesus cried David's question. When the unbearable happens, we want to know "Why?" We might never know the answer fully. But Jesus knew God's answer. The Son of God endured God-forsakenness so that we might be forgiven forever. His righteousness paid for our redemption.

And of that finished work we sing, "Thank you, O my Father, for giving us your Son"!

Lord Jesus, you were God-forsaken so that we don't have to be. How can we ever thank you enough? Help us to show our gratitude for all your grace to us. Help us to live for you. In your name, Amen.

HOW CAN YOUNG PEOPLE WALK IN PURITY?

How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word.
—Psalm 119:9

My first spiritual mentor insisted on Scripture memorization. The verse here was the first one I learned. The Naval Academy had trained me to memorize, from the trivial to the important. So Scripture memorization came easily. Now, after my career as a Navy chaplain, Psalm 119:9 remains for me a beloved verse.

Psalm 119 was written to be memorized in Hebrew. Even our Bibles divide the psalm as originally designed, with each stanza named for a letter of their alphabet: *aleph, beth, gimel* . . . —the ABC's of Hebrew. This made learning the psalm's 176 verses simpler. And each verse begins with that stanza's theme letter: verses 1-8 begin with *aleph*, 9-16 begin with *beth*, and so on.

Psalm 119's theme is simply "the law of the Lord." And that's the answer to to-

day's question. Young people struggle with temptations that would lead away from the Lord's way. So do their elders, but it can be harder when you lack experience. Learning the law of the Lord lays the foundation for our lives, but obedience can seem tiring.

Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Faith in Christ unites us inseparably to him (Philippians 2:1; John 10:28). Psalm 119:9 asks each believer the fundamental question to which Jesus is the only answer. "This is the way; walk in it" (Isaiah 30:21).

Father, we want to keep our way pure, but we stray so easily. Thank you for grace, forgiveness, and new life in Christ. Amen.

WHERE CAN I GO FROM YOUR SPIRIT?

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?
—Psalm 139:7

In this psalm, King David of Israel professes that God sees and knows everything (vv. 1-6) and that God is present everywhere (vv. 7-12). For God, there is no “out of sight, out of mind.” Then the writer praises God as his creator from the time of conception (vv. 13-18). And in the end he bows before the God who searches each human heart and every thought (vv. 19-24). What a feast of poetic praise and prayer—both fearsome and faith-building.

David’s fundamental question is “Can I ever escape God’s gaze?” He uses a wonderful Hebrew parallelism: “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?” These questions evoke both the fear of knowing that God always has his eye on us and the comfort of enjoying God’s eternal presence. These questions may re-

mind us of another question, found in Romans 8:35: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?”

As we can see, the psalm writer fears God but is not scared off. The psalmist knows he can trust God, and we can sense his gratitude that God is always there to watch over, protect, correct, and lead.

Whatever the day brings, even when we stray from God’s way for us, let us take comfort in the reflections of Psalm 139. Our Lord and Savior is with us always (Matthew 28:20). We can also consider an ancient prayer attributed to St. Patrick:

“Christ be with me, Christ within me; Christ behind me, Christ before me; Christ beside me, Christ to win me; Christ to comfort and restore me.” Amen!

WHOM SHALL I SEND?

"Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"

Isaiah 6:8

Would you dare glimpse what Isaiah saw? He had a vision of "the LORD, high and exalted, seated on a throne," surrounded by angels calling to each other, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." In awe, Isaiah could only cry out, "Woe to me! . . . I am ruined!"

Isaiah's life-changing vision pointed ahead to the coming of the Savior. An angel touched a coal to Isaiah's lips, announcing, "Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for"—a powerful yet painful prophecy of the coming Savior's work. So began Isaiah's series of revelations of the coming Savior (Isaiah 7:14; 9:6; 11:1-10 . . .).

God commissioned Isaiah with two simple questions: "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" Later the resurrected Christ would commission his followers: "Go and make dis-

ciples of all nations. . . . And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

The Lord's command and comfort apply to every generation of believers. Will we bear the good news of Jesus in our hearts and on our lips? Will we go today into our work, our studies, our neighborhoods, and our social engagements with Isaiah's vision of God's redemption?

"Whom shall I send?" he asks. Will we say, "Send me"?

Holy Father, we can only imagine the vision Isaiah saw when you called him and changed his life. Grant us a glimpse of your glory so that we may share the same good news with others. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

The word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"
—1 Kings 19:9

Exhausted from running for his life, Elijah was ready to give up. Serving as God's prophet had worn Elijah out, and as he sat alone in the wilderness, he asked God to take his life.

But God had more for Elijah to do. And wherever he went, Elijah found, God was there first.

In a cave at the mountain of the Lord, God asked, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah responded with protests, wrapped in self-pity, and God told him to step outside to meet with him. Elijah witnessed some dramatic displays of power, but God was not in them. Then Elijah heard only a stillness—God's presence.

God is often less dramatic with us, but he does show up to challenge our attitudes. Do we wrap ourselves in self-pity? Do we hear God calling us to step

out and see what he's up to? We need to hear God's reassuring "gentle whisper"—literally, "the sound of silence."

God also asks us, "What are you doing here?" We may wonder that too. This is the question the world asks the church.

God won't abandon his children even if they want to abandon the call he has given them. "Go back and see what I have done!" As God showed Elijah, the future is not bleak. In fact, it's brighter than ever now that Jesus has come!

"What are you doing here?"

Almighty God, life can be overwhelming, and we may want to run away. But you always bring us back! How can we thank you? Help us to fulfilling our calling, for Jesus' sake and in his mighty strength. Amen.

WHO IS THIS?

"Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

—Mark 4:41

The new teacher, Jesus, has been surprising crowds of people with his healing of the sick and his amazing preaching. After a long, tiring day, he gets into a boat with his fishermen-turned-followers to cross the Sea of Galilee, a 13-mile-long (21 km) lake. Being human, Jesus is weary from a day of preaching, teaching, and healing. They set sail, and Jesus falls asleep on a cushion in the stern.

Sleeping on a modern ship in a storm isn't comfortable; it must have been rough on that small fishing boat. The boat was probably about 30 feet long and eight feet wide; it rode low in the water so the fishermen could haul in their nets.

A "furious squall came up," and the boat began to swamp. Everyone needed to help with bailing water to keep them afloat! The disciples also woke

Jesus and said, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"

Sometimes we wonder if Jesus cares about us in our peril and distress, but we can trust that he does. Though it may seem everything is going wrong in our work for him, he will show us we have no need to fear.

Jesus calms the wind and the waves, showing that he is not only an amazing preacher and healer but also the Lord over creation. His disciples are astonished and rightly terrified. Who has power over nature but the Creator himself? Is this human teacher, Jesus, also the Lord of heaven and earth? Yes—and today we know him as our great God and Savior!

Lord of all, even the wind and waves obey you! May we serve you and bring glory to your name! Amen.

WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO FOR YOU?

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him. The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see." —Mark 10:51

Bartimaeus was in the dark, a blind man who had to beg—until the day Jesus came by on his way to be crucified in Jerusalem (Mark 10:32-34).

Shouting above the crowd, Bartimaeus calls to the Savior, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" People tell him to be quiet, but he shouts all the louder, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Graciously Jesus responds: "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus had just asked James and John the same question (Mark 10:36). They had said they wanted places of honor in heaven with Jesus. And he had replied, "You don't know what you are asking."

But Bartimaeus only pleads, "Rabbi, I want to see." And Jesus does not disappoint.

Bartimaeus knew what he needed; Jesus' followers were

the ones in the dark. They wouldn't see the light of Jesus until later.

This incident has raised a question ever since: Who is truly blind, anyway? And after Jesus restores Bartimaeus's sight and sends him away, the man sees what he must do next. Bartimaeus is a model disciple. No longer blind, he follows Jesus.

Christ's question echoes through history: "What do you want me to do for you?"

As we worship together today, can we say, "Rabbi, we want to follow your way"?

Son of David, like Bartimaeus we cry, "Have mercy on us!" Give us eyes to see your way and ears to hear your Word so that we can live as your disciples. In your holy name, Amen.

HOW CAN SOMEONE BE BORN AGAIN?

"How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked.
—John 3:4

Nicodemus, a Pharisee who has carefully studied the law of God for many years, visits Jesus one night after all the crowds have gone. Steering the conversation, Jesus soon points out that no one can have life in the kingdom of God without having a brand-new start, a new birth. Nicodemus is perplexed—and to this he responds, "How can someone be born when they are old?"

He is asking a practical question: "Born again? What? Climb back into my mother's womb to be born a second time?" Nicodemus isn't being sarcastic or scientific. He sounds almost wistful, as if longing for what he needs but cannot have: a second chance. Yet Jesus seems to be suggesting just that.

Who hasn't dreamed of starting over? A careless remark or an irreversible act can destroy

a relationship. If only we could start again! But that's impossible, isn't it? Not for the Son of God! His words are instructive: "born again" here literally means "born from above." God himself provides our second chance.

The Spirit of God eventually gave Nicodemus faith in Christ. He and another Pharisee, Joseph of Arimathea, came forward after Jesus' crucifixion to give his body a decent burial (John 19:38-42).

How can someone be born again? By the Spirit of God. Feel the breeze blowing in your life as you believe in Christ!

Lord Jesus, thank you for Nicodemus's story. We too wonder, "How can this be?" And it's all a gift from you. Thank you! Amen.

WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?

"What about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

—Matthew 16:15

After a 25-mile (40 km) trip on foot from the Sea of Galilee to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (see Daniel 7:13). The disciples said they had heard some say he was John the Baptist or Elijah or another prophet returned from the dead.

But Jesus wanted to dig deeper: "Who do you say I am?"

They were silent until Simon Peter blurted out the most remarkable statement: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus blessed Simon, saying, "You are Peter" (which means "rock"), explaining that God had given him this new understanding.

A spiritual director once asked me, "If you were Peter, having answered Jesus' question, wouldn't you want to ask Jesus what he thought of you?" He sent me off to consider the

question. My reflections on this question surprised me: if Jesus blessed Peter for professing what the Father had shown him, then surely he blesses us as his disciples today too.

I served as a chaplain. At the end of every worship service I led, I was privileged to pronounce the benediction, literally the "good word" from God. Through me, God blessed his people. And each time, I heard Jesus whisper, "Blessed are you too, Chaplain. You get to pronounce God's blessing on our people." We're all God-blessed to be God's blessings, so live today in the blessed assurance that Jesus the Messiah thinks the world of us!

Lord Jesus, what a blessing you are to us! Make us your blessings in this world. For your sake, Amen.

WHAT GOOD IS IT . . . ?

"What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?"
—Mark 8:36

Christ was on his way to Jerusalem, knowing he would be crucified there. And Peter had rebuked him, earning Jesus' harsh reprimand: "Get behind me, Satan!" (Mark 8:31-33).

Now Jesus had gathered a crowd along with his disciples, and he challenged everyone to self-denial, to "take up their cross" and follow him. For to have full life, he explained, we need to give our whole life to God. This means not simply letting go of all we're tempted to hold on to, but also giving cheerfully to others and for others in our gratitude to God.

I read about a French soldier who was so seriously wounded in World War I that his arm had to be amputated. The surgeon was grieved that this young man would have to go through the rest of his life maimed. He wanted to break

the news personally, so he made sure to be at the man's bedside when he awoke. "I'm so sorry," the doctor said, "but you've lost your arm." The soldier's response was startling: "I did not *lose* my arm, doctor; I *gave* it for France."

As a military chaplain, I am especially grateful for people who have served in combat duty. In war, countless people have lost limbs, their sanity, and their very lives. Many have willingly sacrificed for their countries. As followers of the Lord, let us answer God's call to give of ourselves for the cause of the gospel of peace in Christ Jesus.

Lord Jesus, you sacrificed your life to free us from sin and death. May we live grateful lives of giving, for your sake. Amen.

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

He wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"
—Luke 10:29

An expert in the law wanted to cover every detail to justify himself. He wanted to be sure he could inherit eternal life. He knew he had to love God first and to love his neighbor as himself. But now he had one more question for Jesus: "Who is my neighbor?"

The legal expert asked the right person, because someday Jesus will judge everyone according to the way they have served others for his sake (Matthew 25:31-46). And, as we learn from Ephesians 2:8-10, being saved by God's grace motivates us to do good and show God's love to others.

Jesus responded with a parable about a man who gets beaten and left by the roadside. Two travelers—a priest and a Levite—do not have the time or the inclination to help the beaten man, so they pass by. But a Samaritan, whom most

Jewish people would avoid (John 4:9), stops to help without questions or conditions.

The legal expert got the point. And Jesus pressed the point home: "Go and do likewise." Would the man's faith now move him to be a good neighbor?

Who are our neighbors? Are there limits on our love? "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10). How can we be good neighbors in Jesus' name?

What do you want us to do in your name today, Lord? You have provided all we need. How can we thank you? Keep us from holding back our love. In your name, Amen.

PEACE ON EARTH?

"Do you think I came to bring peace on earth?"

—Luke 12:51

Have you heard the story about Jesus' birth and how the angels came to celebrate it? In Luke 2:13-14 we read, "Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared . . . praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.'"

But in our reading today we find Jesus himself asking, "Do you think I came to bring peace on earth?" And he answers, "No, I tell you, but division."

Here Jesus is prodding his followers to think; he wants them to consider carefully what it means to commit their lives to him.

As we think about this, Jesus does seem to bring division. That's because the good news of salvation and the rule of God's kingdom will bring resistance in this world. Sadly,

there will be some people who do not want to believe in God and do not want their hearts changed. Here Jesus warns of family divisions, and many of us know how those can happen because of belief in Jesus.

Jesus warns what *will* happen, not what he *wills* to happen. As we experience the love of God in Christ, from which nothing and no one can separate us (Romans 8:38-39), all other relationships take second place. In Jesus we find that we have peace with God (Romans 5:1-8); through Christ, God's favor rests on us. Do you know Jesus? Then you know that peace.

Lord, help us to rest in your peace today so that we might help others find peace with you too in this troubled world. In your name we pray. Amen.

GOOD TEACHER, WHAT MUST I DO . . . ?

A certain ruler asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"
—Luke 18:18

"A certain ruler"—probably from the synagogue or local government—approached Jesus, asking, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" He wanted the same assurance Jesus had just given for little children.

Jesus' answer to this man was, in short, "Everything or nothing." Either keep God's law perfectly on your own, or accept that no matter how hard you try, you can never guarantee that you'll inherit eternal life. No one can keep God's law perfectly, of course. So we must receive his kingdom like little children, who simply trust their parents and caregivers to provide what's good for them.

Jesus also saw that this man still lacked one thing. So he said, "Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." Faith

in Jesus means following him in this life, giving our all to his kingdom. The man was saddened by Jesus' response, and he went away (see Matthew 19:22; Mark 10:22). For him, Jesus' advice to sell everything, give away the proceeds, and follow him was a deal-breaker.

Is there a deal-breaker for us? Is there anything we can't bear to give up to follow Jesus? If we think we can gain the kingdom of God on our own terms, we are mistaken. But if we can accept that God has already graced us with eternal life, then we're certain his gift is secure.

Lord, help us to think wisely about eternal life. Reassure us that in you our inheritance is secure, and free us to follow you with all our heart. Thank you, Jesus, Amen.

WHAT SHALL I DO . . . WITH JESUS?

*"What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?"
Pilate asked.*

—Matthew 27:22

Pilate's job was to keep peace in Jerusalem. The religious leaders wanted Jesus to be executed for blasphemy. But Pilate could find no crime in him. The leaders stirred the crowd to demand Jesus' execution and Barabbas's release. Pilate tried talking sense to the people. "What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" And they all kept shouting "Crucify him!"

Pilate finally gave up, gave in, and tried to wash his hands of the matter. History won't let him do that, however—and ever since that day Pilate's question demands *our* answer.

The Apostles' Creed asserts that Jesus "was crucified, died, and was buried," and on "the third day he rose again from the dead" and later "ascended to heaven." And now, through his Spirit, Jesus makes his home with us wherever we are. Our

resurrected Savior has come to fill our lives; he won't just settle for a two-minute prayer and a few Scripture verses for our day. Jesus wants far more *of* us and has much more *for* us.

"What shall I do, then, with Jesus?" We can meet him in his Word as we read and study it and hear it preached. We can worship Christ by seeing the glory of creation. We can also seek ways to worship Christ not only on Sundays but every day. Pondering this question can be a great help for our relationship with Jesus!

Dear Jesus, what shall we do with you? How shall we live today in your presence? We need to be with you and worship you daily. Please help us, for your sake. Amen.

WHY SEEK THE LIVING AMONG THE DEAD?

The men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"
—Luke 24:5

Some years ago I accompanied a group of midshipmen on a trip to Israel. We visited many sites, including the places where Jesus died and was buried. It was fairly easy and yet painful to picture myself at the crucifixion, where Jesus died on a cross for our sin. I could relate to the words of a hymn: "Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers."

Then we visited the site of Jesus' empty tomb. A church is now built up around it. I tried to imagine myself at the resurrection too.

The question echoes through the centuries: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" Jesus' resurrection site is impressive. Throngs of pilgrims wait patiently to see and touch the empty tomb.

Did any come to try to validate their faith—as if they might

actually hear the women's reports and see the angels standing there? In a way, that too would be like looking for the living among the cold, dead facts of Jesus' empty tomb.

How do we find the living Jesus today? Consider this: (1) begin each day by inviting Jesus to be active in your life; (2) today live in a way that shows you belong to him; (3) keep in touch with Christ, listening to his Word and talking with him in prayer; and (4) be on the lookout for Christ in every activity and interaction. Indeed, why *would* we look for the living Lord among the dead facts of this world? He is alive, and he wants to lead us into full life!

Risen Christ, be present and real to us, and confirm our faith as you engage with us today! Amen.

DO YOU LOVE ME?

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" —John 21:15

After Jesus' resurrection, Peter and some other disciples went fishing. All night they fished but caught nothing. A man on the beach called out, telling them to fish on the starboard side of their boat. What difference would that make? But they did as he said, and their net filled with fish!

John said, "It's the Lord!" And Peter jumped out of the boat to wade ashore. He found Jesus cooking a breakfast of fish.

Jesus had unfinished business with Peter. Peter had denied Jesus three times during his trial (John 18:15-18, 25-27). After the third denial, Jesus had looked straight at him, and Peter had gone out "and wept bitterly" (Luke 22:60-62). Now Jesus was back and wanted to restore Peter. "Simon," he said, "do you love me more than these?" More than fishing?

More than the friends he went fishing with? Peter could only answer, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus asks the question three times, and it pounds Peter's soul. "Lord, you know everything; you *know* I love you." Tears roll down his cheeks. Jesus says, "Feed my sheep." And he graciously restores Peter, saying, "Follow me!"

Jesus redeems sinners and restores his disciples. He asks us, "Do you love me more than anything else—your career, possessions, friends, and even family? When we answer "Yes," we know he has redeemed and restored us.

Yes, Lord Jesus, we love you, and we want to love you more than anything. Help us to feed your sheep and follow you. Amen.

WERE NOT OUR HEARTS BURNING?

"Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" —Luke 24:32

Two of Jesus' followers walked the dusty road home to Emmaus at the end of a long, perplexing day. That morning, Jesus' tomb had been found empty, and talk of a conspiracy had already begun (see Matthew 28:11-15). The excitement of Jesus' coming as King had turned to despair when he was executed and buried on Friday (Luke 19:28-44; 23:26-54). Now where was his body?

Someone quietly joined their walk and asked what they were discussing. They didn't recognize his voice as he "opened the Scriptures" to them. Upon arriving home, they invited him to come in and stay with them. Then their guest turned the tables on them, taking on the role of host as they began their supper. He thanked God for the bread, broke it, and served it as he had often done for his disciples. Suddenly they saw

that their "guest" was the risen Christ—and he disappeared!

They knew they had to do something. So immediately they returned to Jerusalem to tell the disciples, to share the good news they had burning in their hearts.

When I became a believer in Christ, my heart was aflame with newfound faith. The flame sometimes fades into embers, but, thankfully, the Emmaus account always rekindles it. Does your heart burn within as you read his Word? Ask Jesus to walk with you and help you be a passionate witness for his sake.

Risen Lord, thank you for walking with us each day and hosting us at your table. Rekindle our faith, that your light may shine in us today. In your great name we pray. Amen.

WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAVED?

The jailer . . . brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"
—Acts 16:29-30

In Philippi, Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown into jail after some angry slaveowners brought false charges against them (Acts 16:16-21). Despite such treatment, they took the opportunity to pray and sing to the Lord, and the other prisoners listened to them.

Then a sudden earthquake opened all the cells and loosened all the prisoners' chains. The jailer thought everyone had escaped—and if they had, he would have been executed. Panicking, he drew his sword to kill himself—but Paul stopped him.

In desperation the jailer asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Never missing an opportunity to share the good news, Paul and Silas said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." And that night, as Paul and Silas shared "the word of

the Lord," salvation came to that jailer's household.

What a stunning turnaround! That prison guard went from a quiet night's duty to a hair-raising emergency to the amazing security and serenity of new life in Christ. No wonder "he and his whole household" were "filled with joy" upon hearing the good news.

Some people grow up hearing the good news and experiencing God's love in their home and family life. Others come to believe in God through other experiences—and even in the midst of crises, like the jailer. No matter how it happens, faith in Christ is God's gift. What must we do? Believe!

Jesus, help us to believe in you and enjoy new life forever in your name! Amen.

SHALL WE GO ON SINNING?

Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?

—Romans 6:1

A worshiper at a Navy chapel commented, “My favorite part of the worship service is the ‘assurance of pardon.’ Then I know I’m good to go for the next week.” A weekly reminder of God’s grace inspires him to continue living for Christ!

As Paul warns, though, it’s important that we do not take God’s grace for granted, as if grace simply gives us a license to go on sinning. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a World War II martyr, agreed. He taught against “cheap grace”—or “preaching forgiveness without requiring repentance”—because God’s grace for us was so costly. God’s Son, Jesus Christ, gave up his life to save us from sin.

Paul asks, “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” Of course not! That would disrespect God’s grace and cheapen Jesus’ sacrifice. I’m reminded that when I was a boy, the

worst scolding I could receive was “We didn’t raise you that way.” My folks didn’t sacrifice so that I could just misbehave.

Yet we still fall short. So when we do, we must confess our sins and profess our faith in the Savior’s sacrifice for us.

Remember, baptism unites us with Jesus’ death *and resurrection*, setting us free from sin. “Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.” Paul isn’t calling us to cheap grace, but to the richest life possible in Jesus today!

Father, forgive us for times when we have taken your grace for granted. Spirit of God, keep us from sin so that we may walk the way of life with Jesus. In his name, Amen.

IF GOD IS FOR US, WHO CAN BE AGAINST US?

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?
—Romans 8:31

Today we come to the end of our month of reflecting on questions in the Bible. And we conclude with hope.

In Romans 8, the apostle Paul asks, “What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?” The “things” Paul is referring to are the teachings about salvation that he has discussed earlier, such as freedom from sin and death, the life-giving Spirit who lives in us, the new life we have as God’s children, the promise of renewal despite suffering we may face today, and strength and hope to endure.

Faith in Jesus does not remove all the struggles we may encounter in life. Still, we know that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Somehow, even despite bad

things that can happen in our lives, God works to conform us “to the image of his Son.”

Paul’s question “Who can be against us?” answers itself: *If God is for us, of course no one can be against us!* And Paul goes on to say, “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Dear God, we know that if you are for us, nothing can stand against us. By your Spirit, guide us to live for you. In Jesus, Amen.

This Christmas celebrate the global church with a commemorative book of devotions!



Drawn from Every Land

Written by church and media leaders serving around the world.

This special volume is a great way to spend time in God's Word and celebrate 80 years of Back to God Ministries' work across the globe.

And it makes a great Christmas gift!



Back to God
Ministries International

**Get your copy with a suggested minimum
\$10 donation at BackToGod.net/everyland**



RETURN POSTAGE GUARANTEED
PORT DE RETOUR GARANTI

Today

refresh, refocus, renew



ReFrame
Media



Back to God
Ministries International

3475 Mainway
Burlington, ON L7M 1A9
P.O. Box 5070, STN LCD 1
Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8
905-336-2920
info@todaydevotional.com
www.todaydevotional.com
facebook.com/todaydevotional

Periodicals postage paid at
Grand Rapids, Mich., and at
additional mailing offices.

Today

refresh, refocus, renew



ReFrame
Media



Back to God
Ministries International

1700 28th Street SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407
800-626-3060
info@todaydevotional.com
www.todaydevotional.com
facebook.com/todaydevotional