



Today

Sept/Oct 2018

refresh, refocus, renew

Prayer:
HEART TO HEART
WITH GOD

ALSO: IMAGES OF SALVATION

Friends:

The Heidelberg Catechism, a statement of faith dating back to the 16th-century Reformation, describes prayer as the most important part of our gratitude to God for his salvation. That's a deeply bold statement. In other words, prayer is more essential to the Christian life than obeying the Ten Commandments, loving mercy and doing justice, or going to church to worship. All these things are important, of course, but prayer is at the very root of our relationship with God.



Imagine setting your GPS to guide you—and then throwing it in the back of your car, not bothering to follow its guidance. We pray because we are easily distracted and need to seek God's guidance and wisdom and to follow his will.

This September, Peter Hoytema helps us see how vital prayer is to the Christian life. In prayer we seek the very heart of God.

Then, in October, George Young walks us through a range of biblical images pointing to salvation. What does it look like to be "saved"? The Bible offers many pictures, metaphors, and parables to describe God's grace and care for us.

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

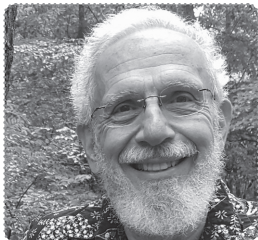
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**"Prayer: Heart to
Heart with God"**
Peter Hoytema



"Images of Salvation"
George R. Young

Managing Editor: Eleanor Lamsma
Executive Editor: Steven Koster

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ReFrame
Media

october

Images of Salvation

George R. Young

The Bible uses vivid images and parables that help us better understand salvation. We need these helpful word pictures and stories because our eyes and ears are not yet used to heavenly realities. This month we'll look at some of the many, many down-to-earth images of salvation that the Bible contains.

We can give thanks that the Bible doesn't read like a philosophy textbook. Jesus preached to the crowds and did not look down on anyone. The carpenter of Nazareth himself grew up with calluses on his hands and dirt under his fingernails. He descended from heaven and talked our language.

George Young, a native New Yorker, worked as a taxi driver in New York City before studying to become a pastor. Then he, his wife Ruth, and their children were missionaries for many years in northeastern Japan. They worked with ministers and believers from the Reformed Church in Japan to spread the good news of salvation in Christ and establish new churches. Now George and Ruth are retired and live in the northeastern United States, nearer to their children and grandchildren.

REDEEMED

You know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed . . . but with the precious blood of Christ. . . .
—1 Peter 1:18-19

During the Great Depression in the 1930s, when many people didn't know where their next meal was coming from, they sometimes had to bring their last valuable possession (perhaps a memento from their parents) to get cash at a pawn shop. They would receive a pawn ticket as a voucher, and then, later, if they could scrape together enough money, they could redeem their precious item, buying it back "out of hock."

As far as I know, there were no pawn shops in Bible times. But the Bible tells of people who fell into poverty and had to sell the family farm, or sell themselves into service, and they desperately needed a way out. Often it was up to a relative to redeem them (see Leviticus 25:25-55).

My wife's grandmother used to tell us of destitute people who

would knock on her door, begging for something to eat. Thank God, she had enough flour to bake a few extra loaves of bread each week to give to people who were hungry.

It is not just sentimentality to say that people who have never felt the pinch of poverty are sometimes poorer for their constant comfort. Rich or poor, we are all, in a sense, "in hock." Our plight is desperate until we knock on God's door and beg for his mercy. There we will find redemption. We will find that Jesus, our Redeemer, bought us back, at the cost of his precious blood, by dying on the cross.

How strangely wonderful it is, Lord, to think that we have been redeemed by your blood. Thank you that we belong to you. Amen.

REDEEMED FROM SLAVERY

"Everyone who sins is a slave to sin."

—John 8:34

The exodus from Egypt was a pivotal event in Israel's history. The prophets and psalmists refer to it often. For the people of Israel it brought an end to over 400 years of slavery.

It's surprising, then, that the Pharisees said to Jesus, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" (John 8:33). They prided themselves on their ancestry, and to them slavery was just something in their people's distant past. In Jesus' teaching, Israel's slavery in Egypt was a symbol of slavery to sin, a problem for every person in all times.

Even the Israelites in Micah's day felt that God somehow cramped their style. The Lord asked them, "My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me. I brought you up out of Egypt

and redeemed you from the land of slavery."

Many people today, when offered the gift of freedom from sin and release from death to life, prefer the "freedom" to engage in any kind of behavior they desire. Even while dragging chains of sin, some think they can save the world. But, as Jesus said to the Pharisees, unless we believe in him we will die in our sins (John 8:24). Only in Christ can we be set free from slavery to sin and death.

How about you? Are you a slave to your sins and addictions, or have you been set free through faith in Jesus Christ?

Thank you, Lord, for freeing us in Christ, giving us salvation from all that enslaves us. Amen.

A SHADY GRAPE ARBOR

Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid. . . . —Micah 4:4

When I was young, I commuted to school by subway. I walked through a Greek and Italian neighborhood to the station and would see elderly folks sitting in the shade of a grape arbor in their tiny front yards, houses crowded around them, surrounded by the bustle of the city. There they would sit, glass of wine in hand, enjoying a pleasant conversation with old friends. I imagined it must have been that way for them in “the old country” too, where they had come from.

The word pictures we find in Micah 4 point to full life in the kingdom of God, which Jesus will fully establish on this earth when he comes again. Other Bible passages give us similar pictures of peace and joyful abundance (see Isaiah 25:1-9; 65:17-25; Revelation 21:1-5), and even now we can see signs and catch glimpses of God’s

sustaining care and his work among us in this world.

The pressures and hectic pace of life are intensified by the dangers and deep-seated hatred among nations that we hear about in the daily news. But for all who are saved, “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard [our] hearts and [our] minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7). We have a Shepherd who watches over us, and there is no need to fear. We know that although there is enmity between nations and we will face struggles in life, God is sovereign and his everlasting kingdom will prevail.

When we are afraid, Lord, remind us of your loving care and strong presence. In Christ, Amen.

BALM IN GILEAD

Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?

—Jeremiah 8:22

In this frightening passage, the prophet Jeremiah refers to Gilead, a region in Israel that was known for its medicinal balm, or healing salve. In the midst of destruction, there was no place of refuge, no place even for the wounded to find help or healing.

The prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah lived to see the destruction of Israel and Jerusalem by the invading powers from the north: Assyria and Babylon. The people were being punished for worshiping other gods since the days of Solomon. But they refused to repent. Isaiah says, “Woe to the sinful nation, a people whose guilt is great. . . . They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel. . . . Why should you be beaten anymore? Why do you persist in rebellion? Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted.

From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness—only wounds and welts and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with olive oil” (Isaiah 1:4-6). For Israel’s deep-seated rebellion, God allowed other nations to overtake them.

Later, when Jesus came, he did not come as the builder of an ark like Noah, or as a warrior like David. He came as the Great Physician, healing the lame, the sick, and the blind. Still today, our world persists in rebellion against God and is full of wounds and welts. Only in Christ can we be saved, brought back to God, and healed.

Heal us, Lord Jesus, of the sickness that afflicts all people. Heal us, and we will be saved. Amen.

DEBTS FORGIVEN

"Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."

—Matthew 6:12

In this day of credit cards, it's easy to get deep into debt, and the interest rate can make our debt snowball. If we get into that kind of trouble, we may need to visit a credit counselor to help us plan a way out.

In the Law of Moses, God commanded the Israelites to cancel debts at the end of every seven years. The cancellation of debts was a merciful feature of the Law of Moses, and it called for an openhanded, generous attitude toward the poor. Stinginess and lack of concern was inconsistent with the heart of the Law, which, as Jesus said, was based on loving God and caring about your neighbor as much as you care about yourself (see Matthew 22:37-40).

Canceling debts on a society-wide level was to be echoed by a forgiving attitude. The apostle Paul expresses this

beautifully when he says in Ephesians 4:32: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

Have you ever thought of sin as like getting into debt? If you're a slave to some particular sin, it's like digging yourself into a hole, deeper and deeper, making it harder and harder to climb out. Don't indulge yourself, but cry out to God for the forgiveness of your debts, and seek his strength to live an obedient life.

Lord, thank you for your tenderheartedness to us sinners. Forgive us and teach us to be like Jesus, loving and forgiving toward others. In his name, Amen.

LEAPING LIKE A DEER

Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.
—Isaiah 35:6

In my early fifties, I began to have trouble with my feet, and eventually I had to have operations on both of them. Before that, I took walking for granted. I even used to look at elderly folks and wonder why they walked so stiffly. Now I wistfully look at children skipping and playing, and at young people who have a spring in their step. I know what it's like now to have difficulty walking.

Part of the picture of joy in Isaiah 35 was fulfilled one day when Peter and John went to the temple to pray and saw a lame man begging for money. "Look at us!" said Peter, and the man turned toward them. Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." The man's feet and ankles instantly became strong, and he jumped up and began to walk. Then he

went along with them into the temple, "walking and jumping, and praising God" (Acts 3:4-8).

Imagine young deer leaping about in the open and bounding over brooks and fallen trees in their woodland playground. That's like a picture of people celebrating with the sheer joy of redemption and new life in Jesus, who has come to restore all things. "Gladness and joy will overtake them," for they will no longer bear the crushing effects of sin and disease or any guilt, because Jesus bore it all on the cross.

When we are weighed down with struggles in life, Lord, remind us of the joy of salvation, and lift the burdens pressing on our hearts. In your name we pray. Amen.

A FOUNTAIN FOR WASHING AWAY SIN

"On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity."
—Zechariah 13:1

In today's reading from Zechariah 12, the Lord God of Israel is speaking, and the Lord describes himself as "the one they have pierced." This phrase is quoted later in a description of Jesus' death on the cross, saying, "These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: 'Not one of his bones will be broken,' and . . . 'They will look on the one they have pierced'" (John 19:36-37). Through the prophet Zechariah, God was describing the thrust of a Roman spear into Jesus' side.

Another prophet, Isaiah, also described Jesus' suffering: "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

When God pours out his Spirit, we mourn over our sins and look to the Savior, pierced on the cross for our sake—and we are washed clean. No ordinary shower with soap and water can wash away sin. Only the blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross can do that.

Have you felt remorse for your sin? Have you looked upon the one who was pierced? By faith in Jesus, whose shed blood washes our sin away, you can be forgiven and saved.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, that we don't have to be haunted by guilt or by an impure conscience. Thank you for the fountain that washes away even the worst filth. We pray in your name. Amen.

THE SCAPEGOAT

“He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins. . . .”
—Leviticus 16:21

Here in Leviticus, in a lengthy passage about slaughtering animals to atone for people's sins, we find more imagery that points to Jesus.

One such image is the scapegoat. The word *scapegoat* is still used in the English language today, meaning “someone who bears the blame for others.” Usually, though, when people today are looking for a scapegoat, they want to avoid admitting wrong.

The scapegoat image in Leviticus didn't work that way. The people were called to repent and acknowledge their guilt as the priest laid his hands on the goat's head and confessed over it all of the people's sins. This was not some magical mumbo-jumbo. God, in his grace, was accepting a substitute for the people, taking away their sin, sending it out into the wil-

derness for destruction, and counting them righteous.

This is a picture that points to the Savior, Jesus, who came to take on himself the curse for all human sin. He became the scapegoat for us all. As the apostle Paul put it later, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Lord God, thank you for the death of Christ on the cross. Through him, our scapegoat, we are cleansed of our sins, and we have peace with you. Our hearts overflow with gratitude for all you have done for us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE CURTAIN OF THE TEMPLE

With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. —Mark 15:37-38

In the ancient temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, there was a curtain, embroidered with angels, which separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. The Most Holy Place became the dwelling place of God among his people. Only the high priest could go behind the curtain and enter into that place. There he could offer atonement for the sins of the people, once a year.

This taught the people that God is holy and that sinful people cannot stand in God's presence. The curtain of the temple symbolized the separation between the holy God and sinful people. And if anyone violated this practice, they would die.

When Jesus died to atone for our sin, however, he cried out, "It is finished" (John 19:30)—and the curtain separating the people from God was torn in

two. Jesus' death on the cross accomplished everything necessary for our salvation. He became the ultimate High Priest for us, and his finished work reconciled us with God. Because of Jesus, the Spirit of God now comes to live in our hearts, making us his temple.

So we who were once "without hope and without God in the world . . . who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:12-13). We have new life and the power of Christ by the Holy Spirit to live for God each day.

Lord, thank you for loving us and bringing us near to you in Christ, our Savior. Help us to live faithfully for you. In Jesus, Amen.

SACRIFICE

"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."
—John 15:13

Sacrifice has almost disappeared from people's understanding in our Western culture today. Some glimpses of it can be found in war stories, as when a soldier puts himself in harm's way to save the lives of others.

In the ancient world, it was common in many religions to sacrifice an animal for the sake of a person, and even human sacrifice was widespread. We shudder to think of it. Archaeologists have found that young men were buried alive in Irish peat bogs as an offering to the people's gods. And young maidens, in ceremonial dress, were led high into the Andes in South America and left to starve and freeze as an offering to the gods of the mountains.

The worship of God was different. But one day God told Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. This was a test to

see if Abraham really trusted God. Along the way Abraham told Isaac, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering." And when the time for sacrifice came, God provided a ram in place of Isaac.

This shocking story points to the ultimate sacrifice God was planning for the future, when he would send his only Son, Jesus, to be born as a descendant of Abraham and to give up his own perfect life to atone for human sin. Jesus, the Lamb of God, laid down his life for us all, showing how deeply God loves us, so that we can have life with God forever.

Lord, in this selfish world, where we are often tempted to take advantage of others, we remember Jesus' selfless sacrifice. Thank you for such amazing love! Amen.

A BEAUTIFUL BRIDE

I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.
—Revelation 21:2

In many weddings, as the groom waits joyfully, the bride, beautifully dressed in her wedding gown, is led down the aisle by her father.

The “bride and groom” theme resonates in human society as a picture of mutual delight, commitment, and faithfulness. The Bible even uses this image to describe the relationship between God and his people. Isaiah 62:4-5 tells us, for example, “The LORD will take delight in you, and your land will be married. As a . . . bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.”

The New Testament speaks often about the church as the bride of Christ. And in Revelation 21 we see a picture of the New Jerusalem, representing God’s people and the dwelling place of God, “prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her hus-

band.” In the new heaven and earth described here, all of God’s promises will be fulfilled, and we’ll be able to delight in full life with God forever.

In the meantime, we may feel unworthy of God’s love, knowing we are sinners. Or, perhaps for some of us, the ideals of joy and delight in marriage may not be a reality. Even in times of doubt and struggle, though, God himself is with us.

Hold on to Jesus in faith; he is watching over and holding on to you. He loves you and wants you to flourish and enjoy life to the full!

Lord, thank you for showing us the amazing depths of your love for us in Jesus. In his saving name we pray. Amen.

THE HOLY CITY

The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass. . . . The city does not need the sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light. . . . —Revelation 21:21-23

I took some friends on an old taxi driver's tour of New York City. We enjoyed breakfast at my favorite "greasy spoon," plunged into the subway, ferried to the Statue of Liberty, walked Wall Street and Times Square, strolled Broadway and the theater district, sat quietly in St. Patrick's Cathedral, and stood in awe on the 100th-floor balcony of a skyscraper, taking in a panoramic view of the city. They pronounced it "an exciting place to live."

But I didn't show them the places where I'd been mugged, the kinds of places that the singer Michael Card calls "doorways darkened by despair."

The picture Revelation draws of the New Jerusalem is beautiful, exciting, and full of diversity. The nations stream into it from across the earth. And the Holy City has no dark side.

It has no intractable injustice, simmering racial hatred, porn shops, unemployment lines, broken family relationships, potholes, or trash. Because God is there, the city is full of goodness and light; evil has no place to hide.

This vision offers an invitation and a warning. In the Holy City, God will be with us, and all nations will be brought to Christ in harmony. Yet "nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful."

Are you looking forward to the day when we can live there in peace and harmony with God?

Lord, we long for the beauty of life in the Holy City. Bring us to live with you there forever. Amen.

THE ROCK

They drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.
—1 Corinthians 10:4

Many passages in the Bible speak of God as a rock. Jacob called God “the Rock of Israel” (Genesis 49:24). Hannah said, “There is no Rock like our God” (1 Samuel 2:2). And David said, “Exalted be my God, the Rock, my Savior!” (2 Samuel 22:47). The picture is supremely appropriate. God is always our firm, faithful, everlasting foundation.

So when the people of Israel quarreled with Moses in the desert, demanding water to drink, God told Moses to take his staff and go to “the rock at Horeb.” God would stand before the rock, and Moses was to strike it with his staff. Water would gush out of the rock for the people to drink.

The people had been belligerent, saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?” And God showed them that of course he was there. The people watched the

miracle happen, and their thirst was satisfied. God, as always, provided for them.

Years later, when the religious leaders quarreled with Jesus, he said in a loud voice, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them” (John 7:37-38). By “living water,” he meant the blessings of eternal life (see John 4:10-14). Jesus is the Rock of salvation who was stricken so that we can receive the water of life.

Give us living water in this dry, barren world, Lord. May your blessings of salvation flow from us to others. In your name, Amen.

A BRONZE SNAKE ON A POLE

"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."
—John 3:14-15

A snake on a pole may seem a strange image to represent healing and blessing from God. But in the context of the story in Numbers 21, that's what happened. God made it so. And the people learned, as they often had done before, that they needed to trust in God.

We might not be surprised that the people grumbled against God and Moses in the desert. All around them was a trackless, howling wilderness, with searing heat and blinding sandstorms. Ahead of them were powerful enemies, barricaded in high, walled cities.

But God had solved all of their crises before: bringing them through the Red Sea, giving them manna (bread), quail (meat), and water each day. With such a firm foundation for faith, was there any reason for the people not to trust God with their future?

The same question can apply today for God's people who might grumble against him. And we have a lot more of God's faithfulness in history to remind us of his care. We also have the good news of salvation through Jesus, who was lifted up on a cross for our sake. He took on himself all the punishment for sin and rebellion that was rightly ours to bear. Jesus even explained that the snake on a pole in Moses' day pointed to his saving work on the cross. So everyone who looks to him and believes may now have eternal life.

Do you trust him?

Lord, turn our eyes upon Jesus, give us faith to trust him, and save us. Amen.

THE PASSOVER

Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.

—1 Corinthians 5:7

The scenes in our reading for today are quite graphic, and they may be shocking if you haven't encountered them before. By painting the blood of a lamb on the doorposts of their houses, the enslaved people of Israel were spared from a plague of death. Seeing the blood on their doorways, the Lord passed over them. But the plague took the lives of all the Egyptians' first-born sons. There was wailing throughout Egypt because the hard-hearted Pharaoh would not listen to God's plea through Moses: "Let my people go!"

The Jewish Feast of Passover has been celebrated every year since that day long ago. And it's no coincidence that Jesus' last supper with his disciples was during the Passover feast. He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until

it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God" (Luke 22:15-16).

At that supper, Jesus showed his disciples that the bread and wine of the meal symbolized his body and blood, given and poured out for them. And on the next day he gave up his life to be sacrificed as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). As the ultimate Passover Lamb, Jesus freed us from being slaves to sin (John 8:34). Because he took on the punishment for our sin, the judgment for sin has passed over us. Believing in him, we have new life to live with joy and trust in the Lord forever!

O God, help us to share the love and mercy of Christ, the Passover Lamb, our Savior. Amen.

THE ARK OF THE COVENANT

Between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the covenant law, I will meet with you. . . .
—Exodus 25:22

To learn about the ark of the covenant, we need to look to the authority of the Bible. We won't find the right information in movies like *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*, or in other stories or legends.

Some translations of the Bible call the ark a "chest" so that young readers won't confuse it with Noah's ark, which was huge (Genesis 6:15). Others call the cover "the mercy seat" because God is described as enthroned there between the cherubim (angels; see 1 Samuel 4:4). Other translations call it "the atonement cover." And once a year the high priest would enter the Most Holy Place and sprinkle blood on the cover of the ark to make atonement for the people's sin.

Forgiveness and mercy were central to God's relationship with his people. And to this day Jews celebrate the Day of

Atonement (Yom Kippur), as one of their most holy days.

In the ark were the Ten Commandments of God's law. The law shows us how to honor God with our lives, but we always fall short. So we need atonement and forgiveness. When Jesus, our ultimate High Priest, shed his blood for us, he made the ultimate atonement, fulfilling the requirements of the law "once for all" (Hebrews 10:10). God is indeed forgiving and merciful.

Have you experienced God's holiness and mercy in your life?

Holy and merciful God, thank you for making a way for us to be forgiven and to live in your presence—through the blood of Christ, our Savior. Amen.

PRIESTLY GARMENTS

"There are to be twelve stones, one for each of the names of the sons of Israel. . . ."
—Exodus 28:21

Israel's high priest was to wear special garments glittering with engraved precious stones. These garments gave Aaron dignity and honor, pointing to Jesus, our ultimate High Priest.

The breastpiece included 12 precious stones, each engraved with the name of one of the 12 tribes of Israel. The instructions for using the garments say, "Whenever Aaron enters the Holy Place, he will bear the names of the sons of Israel over his heart . . . as a continuing memorial before the LORD."

The variety of hues and colors in the stones representing the whole people of God helps us recognize the diversity of all peoples who are now part of God's family in Christ. We are all precious in his sight.

In Isaiah 54:11-13 God speaks of the redeemed this way:

"Afflicted city . . . I will rebuild you with stones of turquoise, your foundations with lapis lazuli. I will make your battlements of rubies, your gates of sparkling jewels, and all your walls of precious stones. All your children will be taught by the LORD, and great will be their peace." And in a vision of heaven in Revelation 7:9 we see a multitude "from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne [of God] and before the Lamb."

Will you be there too? God wants his people from all nations to live with him in peace and abundance forever!

Thank you, Lord, that each one of us is precious in your sight. Bear us close to your heart and guide us each day, we pray. Amen.

THE BODY

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.
—1 Corinthians 12:27

The apostle Paul tells the church at Rome, “In Christ, we, though many, form one body” (Romans 12:5). And to the Corinthians he says, “You are the body of Christ.” When we are saved in Jesus Christ, we become part of the church, and each of us is a valuable member of the body of Christ.

The idea of being a member of the body is different from that of being a member of a club or some other organization. You are a part of a living body, like an eye, an ear, or a hand.

“To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” We are a part of the church so that, in a way that is unique to our God-given abilities, we may contribute to the body’s health, vigor, and growth.

In the early church, it seems, there were two extremes.

Some people said, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body.” And others said, “I am an eye, but you are a hand; I don’t need you!”

Some people think of the church as a stuffy, boring club. But we are all saved to be a part of something larger than just our lonesome selves. Together, in the body of Christ, we can do greater things to encourage each other in the faith and bring Christ’s love and peace to a broken world. Discover your gifts, and use them in service to Christ, the head of the church.

O Lord, where in your body would you like me to serve? Help me not to be scornful or envious of other parts of your body. Help us all work together for good. In your name, Amen.

LOST AND FOUND

"While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."
—Luke 15:20

In one of my earliest memories, I remember being a frightened little boy sitting in a police car. With the two-way radio crackling and the roof-light flashing, we drew up to police headquarters near a sprawling park in Queens, New York City. I had wandered from my family's picnic on one of the park's long paths through the woods. Mom and Dad had searched for me frantically, imagining the dangers to their child in a city of 8 million strangers. My heart leaped: there they were! Hugs and kisses and endearing words followed, and effusive thanks to the officer, and immense relief.

Jesus told a story about a wandering, lost son. The heart-wrenching agony of the father in that story would have been greater even than my parents endured when I was lost as a child. The son in Jesus' story

was full-grown, and by asking for his share of the inheritance, he was telling his dad that he wished he were dead. The father could have gotten angry and disowned the son, but instead, with compassion like that of God the Father, he kept the door open and waited for his son to return to his senses.

Could there be anything more powerful than God's love for us? The gospel is not just some philosophical exercise but a heart-wrenching, real-life drama that brings us to tears of gratitude. It moves us to turn back and follow Jesus, to live as our loving Father calls us to.

Lord, thank you for your amazing love and for seeking us when we have wandered. Guide us to be faithful. In Jesus, Amen.

WHEAT, WEEDS, AND A MUSTARD SEED

"The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where did the weeds come from?'"

—Matthew 13:27

We know that the world we live in has many good things and amazing blessings, but there is also hardship and brokenness. Ever since our first parents fell into sin (Genesis 3), there has been toil and trouble amid all the good things God provides us in life.

We can find and cultivate all kinds of good food, but we have to work hard for it. We can enjoy good health, but we can also get sick—and even die. Nature can be breathtakingly beautiful, but it can also be viciously cruel.

In his parable about the wheat and the weeds, Jesus points out the corruption and brokenness of life in this world. And because there is still much good amid the damaging effects of sin and evil, he is willing to wait for the time of harvest. At that time the judgment will

come, and the weeds, representing wicked people and all their evil works and systems, will be cast out (see Matthew 13:36-43).

In the meantime, though, the kingdom of God will grow in surprising ways, like the huge plant that grows from a tiny mustard seed. At first it may not even be noticeable. But as it takes root and grows, the good seed of the kingdom spreads far and high and deep and wide, providing comfort and support and rest and peace, even amid the troubles of everyday life.

Have you found the peace and rest of the kingdom of God, and will you help others find it too?

Lord, grant us your peace and grace in this troubled world, and help us to share it for your sake. Amen.

LOVE THE LORD, LISTEN TO HIS VOICE

Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him.
—Deuteronomy 30:19-20

As Moses prepared God's people to enter the promised land after more than forty years in the desert, he challenged them to follow God and choose life. "I command you today," he said, "to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him . . . then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you." Further, Moses said, "Listen to his voice, and hold fast to him."

The instructions seemed simple enough, and yet the people struggled constantly with sin and disobedience. With rebellious attitudes and actions they broke their promises to God generation after generation.

But throughout all that time God remained faithful. The people couldn't hold on to him, but God held on to them. And eventually he sent his own Son to become one of

them, a child of Israel, a son of Abraham. He would live without sin, and he would shepherd the people to live by God's Word.

When Jesus came, he taught and healed people, and he showed that he is the faithful shepherd for all who will listen. "My sheep listen to my voice," he said. "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:27-28).

Do you hear his voice? Listen to him. He loves you and will never let you go.

Lord Jesus, teach us to walk in the way of life. Guide us to listen, obey, and trust your Word always. In your name, Amen.

A NEW HEART

"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you." —Ezekiel 36:26-27

In December 1967, a team of doctors led by Christiaan Barnard of South Africa performed the world's first human heart transplant. The news electrified people around the globe. Since then, countless lives have been saved by heart-transplant operations.

When the Bible talks about a person's heart, though, it is usually not referring to the organ that pumps blood through the body. For thousands of years the heart has been a symbol of what we call our soul, the center of our being, the seat of our thoughts and emotions, what makes us "us."

Still today, in everyday conversation, if someone is merciless, we may say they are "stony-hearted" or "hard-hearted." So we know what God was saying when he promised his people, through the prophet Ezekiel, "I

will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you."

This is the new birth Jesus spoke about when he said, "No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again" (John 3:3). We receive new birth, new life, through the Spirit of God. Previously our stony hearts were dead toward God, but when his Spirit fills us with new life, we are revived and given a new heart of love for God and all people.

Holy Spirit, you gave life to lifeless clay. Breathe life into us; come and live within us, that we may have new life and salvation in Christ. Amen.

TREASURE IN CLAY JARS

We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. —2 Corinthians 4:7

In ancient times there were no banks as we know them. So people would keep their valuables and treasure hidden, and they would keep it in everyday containers like clay jars, tucked away in a secret place or buried in the ground.

Paul makes good use of the contrast between the clay and the treasure. The cheap, rough, material of a clay jar is totally different from the refined, precious jewels and coins it may contain. And Paul compares the treasure to the precious message of salvation that God calls us to share in Jesus' name, despite all our earthly weaknesses and sinfulness.

How precious are the "wonderful words of life," the message of forgiveness through God's love and grace, the news of Jesus' victory over death, and the promise of our own resurrection! There is no truth

so precious as the gospel of Christ!

Often, however, we get discouraged in our own weakness. Even if we are not persecuted or imprisoned for our faith like Paul was, we can understand the feeling of being "hard pressed on every side." Until the day we are called into eternal glory, we must not lose heart. Till then, let this be our motto: "We also believe and therefore we speak." Let us not lapse into silence. The same grace that forgave our sin carries us on, through life, so that light may shine out of darkness.

Lord Jesus, you give us the precious words of life. As we follow you, teach us how to live each day in the boundless grace of God. In your name we pray. Amen.

BROKEN CISTERNS HOLD NO WATER

"My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water."

—Jeremiah 2:13

In the chaos leading up to the French Revolution (1789-99), many churches in France were converted into "Temples of Reason." People lifted up the "goddess of reason" to celebrate the new Age of Reason in place of the fading Age of Faith. Not long afterward the Age of Romanticism came along to replace the tyranny of reason by lifting up passions and feelings.

Like a pendulum swinging back and forth, each age has its own ideology. Sometimes there is a good reason for the change. But usually only one side of truth is exalted. And when that becomes idolized, it prompts a reaction. There is a place for reason, a place for emotions, a place for art, a place for science, and much more. But when people highlight ideals over the sovereignty of God, they become idols

(false gods) and are eventually found to be inadequate. Idols are ultimately unsatisfying.

That is what happened in the days of Jeremiah. "My people have exchanged their glorious God for worthless idols," said the Lord. "They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water." Like idols, broken cisterns leave us thirsty and longing for living water, a gushing spring that never runs dry. Regardless of what people may say from age to age in history, Jesus is always the living water who fills us with the gift of eternal life (John 4:14).

Lord, fill us with grace and truth, your living water for this parched, thirsty world. May we honor you first in all we do. Amen.

WISE BUILDERS

"Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock."

—Matthew 7:24

Here Jesus explains how building our life is like building a house. If we want a house that will last, it must have a solid foundation. And the only foundation for living is to listen to Jesus' teaching and put it into practice.

When the apostle Paul talked about building up the church of Jesus, he used house-building language also. In 1 Corinthians 3:11-13 he warned, "No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is."

Paul used similar imagery in Ephesians 2:20-22 to describe God's household—"built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief corner-

stone. . . . And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."

Describing Jesus as "the living Stone," the apostle Peter adds, "You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house." And why? Not just to have a solid, full life worth living, but "that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:4-5, 9). Jesus wants us to live by his Word and teaching so that we can share his message with others—and help them have a life built on Christ too!

Lord, thank you for the assurance and eternal security we have in you. Use us to help others find this full life also. Amen.

THE STREAM OF NATIONS

In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. —Isaiah 2:2

Through his Word, the Bible, God gives us hope and an eternal perspective, and its images of salvation stir the heart. If we didn't know its promises, the hatred between nations would seem unsolvable, and any efforts at peace would seem futile.

But God promises that he will "settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore." For "in the last days" all nations will stream in to recognize and honor the Lord.

There was actually a foretaste of this in Old Testament times, when the Queen of Sheba came to visit Israel's King Solomon in Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 9:1-9). Her realm was in southwestern Arabia

about 900 years before Jesus came. Historians say that before the time of Christ, Judaism had spread south to Arabia and over to Ethiopia in Africa.

Since the time of Jesus' death and resurrection, the nations have begun streaming into God's kingdom. Jesus' followers have gone out to spread the good news "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). And when the Lord comes again to live with us in his Holy City, "the nations will walk by its light, and the kings of earth will bring their splendor into it" (Revelation 21:24). There will be peace in God's eternal kingdom.

Come quickly, Lord Jesus, and usher in your kingdom. Until you do, open closed doors so that the nations may enter into your peace. Amen.

JUSTICE LIKE A RIVER

Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!
—Amos 5:24

It is not unusual to be saved through faith in God and yet suffer under oppression. A person may walk with Jesus each day and yet have to labor under discrimination, deal with unfair working conditions, or face religious persecution—with little chance of getting out from under the grindstone.

What's particularly scorching about Amos's prophecy is that some of the worst oppressors were Israelites who were zealous in their religious rituals. They brought sacrifices to God; they observed all the religious holidays. They followed the law of God to the letter. But they had no concern for other people. Through Isaiah, God said, similarly, "Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. . . . Your hands are full of blood! . . . Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take

up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow" (Isaiah 1:13-17). Wherever this charge may apply today, it calls for self-examination of our attitudes and account books. It may also call for debate and accountability in our community and business circles.

Ultimately, on the day of the Lord, the Judge of all humankind will usher in complete justice. And for those who have repented and turned to Christ, all oppression and poverty will cease. On that day, justice will roll down like a mighty river.

"Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23-24). Amen.

WITH GOD'S SPIRIT IN US

"Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live. . . ." —Ezekiel 37:13-14

By the Spirit of the Lord, Ezekiel had an unforgettable vision. The grisly scene of bones scattered across a valley might seem a terrifying nightmare, with the evidence of death all around. But God turned that valley of the shadow of death into a place of life. The dry, scattered bones began rattling and joining together, and soon they were covered by muscles and skin. And when the breath of life entered the people's remade bodies, they sprang to life again.

God said this was a sign for his people, who thought they were dead, dried up, cut off, and without hope in the world. They were exiled from their land as punishment for generations of sinning against God. But he promised to restore them to himself by putting his Spirit in them and giving them new life.

God accomplished this in surprising ways through his Son, Jesus Christ. He came to pay for human sin by giving up his own life and then rising from the dead. Then God's Spirit came to breathe new life in us, guiding us to know the Lord and trust in him for forgiveness and salvation. As Paul put it, though we were "without hope and without God in the world," he "made us alive with Christ even when we were dead" in our "transgressions and sins" (Ephesians 2:1, 4-5, 12). And one day, when Jesus returns, we will also rise from our graves to live with him! (See 1 Thessalonians 4-5; Revelation 21-22.)

Lord of life, fill us with your Spirit and guide us in truth to live with your goodness and love forever. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

ADOPTION

In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ.
—Ephesians 1:4-5

Maybe you have read about or seen heart-wrenching pictures of orphanages in some countries where babies lie unattended in their cribs, crying pitifully in unchanged diapers. No one plays with them, hugs them, kisses them, or coos at them. The workers are overburdened and overwhelmed and don't know what to do.

Ezekiel 16 includes a striking allegory about Jerusalem in its miserable plight: "On the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed. . . . No one looked on you with pity. . . . You were despised. Then I passed by and saw you kicking about in your blood, and . . . I said to you, 'Live!' I made you grow like a plant of the field. . . . You became mine" (Ezekiel 16:4-8).

That is what 1 John 3:1 is talking about when it says, "See what great love the Father has

lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!" Or, as Paul put it, "In love he predestined us for adoption. . . ." If God had left us in our sinful state, we would have died. And today, because God has put his Spirit in us, we can live for him.

Because of his love for us, we can turn away from sin. Believing in Christ, we are washed, and we live in his love. We are cherished. God becomes our loving Father. He loves and disciplines us as his children, and we live in his family forever. What a beautiful picture of the tenderness of our God!

Father, thank you that through Jesus we are yours. Help us to reflect your love in us by sharing your love with others. In Jesus' name, Amen.

INHERITANCE

The righteous will inherit the land and dwell in it forever.

—Psalm 37:29

The Bible has a lot to say about inheritance, and it all points to God's promises of inheriting full life in his kingdom forever.

God shows his goodness by giving an inheritance to his children. "Those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land," says the psalmist. "The meek will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity." In ancient Israel the focus was on the land God had given the 12 tribes of Israel, but today we know that this refers to the whole earth in the new heaven and new earth. In fact, Jesus quoted from this psalm when he said, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5).

God's goodness inspires parents to leave an inheritance for the generations that follow. Money saved up for one's children and grandchildren, so that they may have a head start in

life, is a good thing. But people who honor the Lord also show care and compassion for the poor, and they work against injustice and discrimination. In all that he did, Jesus modeled these important teachings.

Do good, care for people in need, save up your pennies for your children. Love the Lord, love your neighbor in Jesus' name, share the good news of God's love, and know that, by grace, you have the blessings of eternal life in his kingdom.

Lord, you are our greatest treasure. Help us not to live for ourselves and our own comfort, but to give from the abundance you give—to help people in need and to bless our children, especially with the inheritance of faith. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

WAR AND PEACE

"Woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short."

—Revelation 12:12

The apostle John saw a vision of war in heaven, of the dragon defeated and hurled down to earth, furious "because he knows that his time is short." This is a vivid image of reality. It is the spiritual reality behind the wars that rage around us. As the devil whispers temptations in our ears, he also sows discord among the nations and goads them to war.

Human history reveals an unending parade of war and struggle. The past century has seen perhaps the worst destruction of all. Soon after World War I came World War II, with the Allies defending democracy and liberty against the threats of dictatorship in Germany, Italy, and Japan. Then Italy was defeated, and then Germany, and then finally Japan.

But the sense of relief and joy after World War II didn't

last long. More conflicts came along, from Korea to Vietnam amid the rise of communism, the nuclear arms race, and bitter fighting in the Middle East, to radicalist terrorism and years of war to try to stop it. It's just one confrontation after another.

Only the return of Christ will put an end to all this trouble. And the dragon, along with death itself, will be destroyed. Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly!

Lord, we pray, for peace—your peace. May the peoples of the earth come to know peace with God. And may we be instrumental in bringing peace to others. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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