

A photograph of a forest path. Sunlight filters through the trees, creating a warm, golden glow. The path is covered in fallen leaves and is flanked by lush green foliage. The overall mood is peaceful and serene.

Sept/Oct 2021

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

**CHANGED TO
LIVE LIKE JESUS**

ALSO: JESUS IN THE PSALMS

Dear Friends:

The Bible's 150 psalms stand out as beautiful prayers and songs. They express a wide range of emotions about living for and with God in this world, and they include lots of themes—wisdom, celebration, lament, history, meditation, prophecy, and more—while engaging us in many situations. As a result, it can be a bit challenging to see how the book of Psalms holds together in a unifying way.



In September, Pastor Bob Arbogast uses the theme of “Jesus in the Psalms” as a unifying thread to listen to and apply the psalms to our lives. While this isn't the only way to listen to psalms, there's something right about this approach that encourages and deepens our love not only for the psalms but also for Jesus himself.

For October's devotions, Pastor A.J. Gretz explores Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. There we find the “nuts and bolts” of what it means to be followers of Jesus in our daily lives. Jesus calls us to live with a pure heart for God each day rather than just being religious. Though none of us can reach the high bar Jesus sets, we can begin to live like Jesus as we learn to follow him and seek God's will in our lives. And in God's strength we can trust that he will help us stand strong, whatever storms come our way.

May God's Word refresh, refocus, and renew you each day!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

—Kurt Selles

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**“Jesus in the Psalms”
Bob Arbogast**



**“Changed to Live
Like Jesus”
A.J. Gretz**

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**ReFrame
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Jesus in the Psalms

Bob Arbogast

Read a psalm, and questions will come. What is the story behind the psalm? Who is speaking in the psalm? What is the message of the psalm?

Those questions may invite surprising answers if we listen to the psalm with Jesus in mind. Then we may hear the psalm telling his story or raising his voice or conveying his message. It's not the only way to listen to a psalm. But there is something right about listening to a psalm this way. For the next month, let's listen to psalms with Jesus in mind. I hope this encourages and deepens your love for Jesus.

Bob Arbogast is the pastor of Celebration Fellowship church in Ionia, Michigan. In his spare time, he plays guitar in a West Michigan blues band. He and his wife, Jan, have been married forty years and have three adult daughters. Bob has been praying the psalms since 2002.

IT'S ALL ABOUT JESUS

"Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." —Luke 24:44

The whole Bible is about Jesus. This is true of the New Testament, which tells the story of Jesus' coming to live with us. And it is true of the Old Testament, written long before Jesus was born.

The New Testament and the Old Testament make up the whole Bible, and together they tell the story of God's love for the world. That love comes into clearest focus in Jesus: through his life and work, through his death and resurrection.

On the first Easter Sunday, Jesus appeared to his disciples. They were still reeling from his death two days earlier. But now here he was—standing in their midst! They had no idea how to puzzle it all out. So Jesus helped them see how his story fulfills the Old Testament (the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms).

Sometimes we think this *fulfillment* is only about things in the story of Jesus that were predicted in the Old Testament. But there is much more to it. Fulfillment is especially about words and events in the Old Testament finding a more profound meaning in the story of Jesus.

This month we will notice how the story of Jesus fills out the meaning of various portions of the Psalms—because the whole Bible has something to say about Jesus.

Jesus, the Bible is wonderful, and it is all about you. We look forward to seeing how you fill out the meaning of the Psalms. Amen.

SIN, SUFFERING, AND SALVATION

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

King David in the Old Testament had his share of suffering. That's clear from Psalm 38, described as "a psalm of David." He speaks of being wounded and filled with pain. Friends and neighbors abandon him. Enemies hate him and accuse him. Some want to kill him. It's "because of my sin," he says. And he's right.

Not every sin leads to a particular suffering. And not all suffering is from particular sins. But rebellion against God's ways *does* unleash suffering into our human experience. So David the sinner suffers, and from his suffering he cries out to God. Maybe you know what that's like.

Jesus certainly knows. It's there in Psalm 38. Yes, this psalm is about sin. And no, Jesus himself never sinned. But he did suffer. He suffered because the

sins of the world, including my sins and yours, were laid on him. He carried that immense burden to the cross. The silent anguish, the pounding heart, the failing strength, the cry of forsakenness—it's all there in Psalm 38, and it was all there on the cross.

But that was not the end. From his own suffering, Jesus cried out to God. And his cry was heard. On the third day, God raised him from the dead. Jesus had won the ultimate victory over sin. Yes, we still sin. And we still suffer. But sin no longer has the power to separate us from God. Jesus saw to that.

Jesus, you carried our sin to the cross. And by suffering under that burden, you set us free. What a Savior! Amen.

THE LORD IS OUR SHEPHERD

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."
—John 10:11

Psalm 23 may be the most well known of the 150 psalms. It's a comforting, calming psalm. No wonder it's a favorite.

Psalm 23 is credited to King David, who tended his father's sheep when he was young. David was a shepherd who became Israel's king. That was fitting, for in the biblical world, leaders were thought of as shepherds. They had a responsibility to protect and provide for their people. To say "The LORD is my shepherd" is to say that God is the ultimate source of safety and well-being.

Jesus calls himself "the good shepherd." In other words, he is the true king over God's people. But he is a different sort of king. Traditionally a king would take up a sword and raise an army to defeat the enemies of his people. That's what David did. That's also what some people expected Jesus to do.

But Jesus didn't defeat great enemies by slaughtering them with weapons of war. He defeated them by being slaughtered himself. He let sin and death and all the powers of evil do their worst. And they did. But they had no power over Jesus, and death could not hold him.

Jesus rose from the dead. He is our good shepherd. He is our ultimate source of safety and well-being, now and forever.

Jesus, good shepherd, we trust you to protect us and provide for us. Thank you for green pastures and quiet waters, and for your presence with us in the darkest valleys. Amen.

LIGHT AND LIFE

With you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.

—Psalm 36:9

Psalm 36 speaks about light and life in the same breath. No wonder. Most creatures need light to live—if not directly, then at least indirectly. So light and life go together.

All light and all life have their source in God. In the Bible's first creation story (Genesis 1), there is only darkness until God says, "Let there be light." Under that light, life emerges. In the Bible's final new-creation story (Revelation 22:1-5), there is no darkness but only God's light and an ever-fruitful tree of life.

And then there is Jesus. Crucified on a tree of death, he is the light of the world. And that light is our life. Jesus says, "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

As I write this, the darkness of winter is approaching. But

every winter, no matter how dark and gloomy, gives way to the light and life of spring. In the same way, by his death on the cross Jesus defeated darkness and death, and by his resurrection he shines the springtime light of God's new creation over the horizon. We still have to wait a while. But the time is coming when there will be no darkness and no death—only light and life!

Thank you, Jesus, for dealing with darkness and death. Thank you for being our light and our life. Shine before us to lead the way. Amen.

A SPECIAL GLORY

You have made [human beings] a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. —Psalm 8:5

Psalm 8 celebrates the glory of God. Take a look at the night sky, says this psalm. Moon, stars, galaxies. Vast beyond imagining! It all reflects the glory of God. And it reminds us how small we are. Not that we need a reminder. Lose your job, and you feel small. Fail at marriage, and you feel puny. Fall into depression, and you feel like nothing at all.

But there is more to being human than being small. Psalm 8 says that God made us just a little lower than the angels, and that God has given us special glory and honor. We may not be angels, but God has appointed us to care for the earth and all its creatures. And when we do that, we reflect the glory of God—like the vast universe does.

The book of Hebrews applies Psalm 8 to Jesus. It says, “Jesus was made lower than

the angels for a little while” (Hebrews 2:9). The point? Jesus was made a human being. Jesus shared the eternal glory of God the Father. But he left that glory behind to become one of us, to become small right along with us.

So Jesus knows what it’s like to feel puny. He knows what it’s like to feel like nothing at all. But he also knows the special glory of being human. Imagine that.

Jesus, you gave up so much to become a human being. And you made being human more glorious than ever. Amen.

A PEACEFUL SLEEP

In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety.
—Psalm 4:8

Sometimes it's just about impossible to fall asleep. You could be excited because you are planning to leave for a trip in the morning. You could be worried about your son's opioid addiction. Or you could be terrified by a storm that threatens to sink your boat. Whatever the reason, you can't sleep. Your eyes are wide open, and you're staring into the dark. Now what?

Psalm 4 ends this way: "In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety." That verse connects with a gripping scene one night on the Sea of Galilee. There, on a small boat in the midst of a raging storm, Jesus is fast asleep. The boat rises and falls on the swells, taking on water, threatening to sink. The disciples' hearts are racing with fear. The fishermen

among them know how dangerous the storm is.

But Jesus sleeps. He has no doubt that his Father will keep them all safe. As he lays down his head on a cushion, I imagine Jesus saying a trusting prayer: "In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety."

When you have a hard time falling asleep, remember Psalm 4. Pray those words with Jesus. Repeat them softly. As you do, welcome his presence. And may you sleep.

Lord Jesus, when it's time to sleep, help me to turn my anxieties, worries, and fears over to you, trusting you to look after everything. Amen.

THE CREATIVE WORD

In the beginning was the Word. . . . Through him all things were made.
—John 1:1-3

The Bible doesn't focus on the mechanisms of creation, the processes that formed planets, plankton, and platypuses. Instead the Bible points us to the voice of God: "He spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm" (Psalm 33:9). In other words, the vast universe, the solid ground beneath our feet, and the life that surrounds us—all of it results from God's express purpose and intention.

The psalm says that everything was made "by the word of the LORD" (Psalm 33:6). The opening of the book of John picks up on that theme: "In the beginning was the Word. . . . Through him all things were made." And the Word is Jesus. Jesus is God's great purpose and intention.

The story of creation, as the Bible tells it, is this. Through the Word, God makes a home

where the Word will come to live. John describes this a bit later, saying, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14).

One of our daughters sent a picture from her visit to the Grand Canyon. How can we not stand in amazement before that? How can we not glorify God for that? But as awesome as God's creation is, even more awesome is this: the Son of God visits us within this creation and becomes one of us. How can we not glorify God for that?

Jesus, you are God's great purpose and intention. All things have been created in you, through you, and for you (Colossians 1:16). Help us to be "for you" in every way. Amen.

AUTHORITY FIGURE

"I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain."

—Psalm 2:6

Are you in a position of authority? Don't let it go to your head! God wants people to use whatever authority they have for good purposes, not to make a name for themselves or to become a law unto themselves. If only we would honor God's intentions.

In the New Testament story of Jesus, powerful people see Jesus as a threat. Following a pattern described by Psalm 2, they "band together" (v. 2) to get rid of Jesus. To them, God's authority amounts to "chains" and "shackles" (v. 3). So they crucify Jesus, who is the Lord's "anointed" (v. 2), the "king" (v. 6).

In Psalm 2:6, God says, "I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain." In a perverse parody of this statement, those powerful people install Jesus on a cross and plant it on a hill outside Jerusalem. But God exalts that hill. And the

cross turns out to be a throne. Because on the cross Jesus shows what genuine authority looks like.

Powerful people may have nailed Jesus to a cross, but Jesus laid his life down by his own authority. And he did it in obedience to God the Father (see John 10:18). Jesus laid down his life for the sake of God's good purpose of saving the world. That's what real authority looks like.

Lord Jesus, you had no interest in making a name for yourself. Instead you laid down your life to save the world. And now you have the name that is above every name! Amen.

TRANSFORMING HOLINESS

I do not . . . associate with hypocrites. I . . . refuse to sit with the wicked.
—Psalm 26:4-5

Psalm 26 makes me uncomfortable. It's full of boasting and pride. The psalmist says things like "I trust in you, Lord. My thoughts are pure. My desires are proper. I don't associate with sinners. I lead a blameless life. And I always sing your praises." The psalmist has a pretty high opinion of himself. But I don't buy it. Nobody is that holy!

But there is Jesus. Throughout his life, he embodied the holiness described in Psalm 26. He trusted his Father completely: in the wilderness, at sea, under arrest, on the cross. The glory of God filled his thoughts, shaped his desires, and determined his actions. In life and in death, Jesus was blameless.

But Jesus did overturn one part of Psalm 26, and it was scandalous. His opponents complained, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with

them" (Luke 15:2). And they were right. Jesus spent quality time with people who simply did not measure up. To his opponents, that could only mean that Jesus himself did not measure up.

But they were using the wrong measure. To their way of thinking, sin had the power to turn water into poison. But the holiness of Jesus had the power to turn water into wine.

So Jesus transformed sinners back then. And he still transforms sinners today, sinners like you and me.

Jesus, have mercy on me. I am a sinner. By your holiness transform me so that my thoughts and desires and actions give glory to God. Amen.

GOD-FORSAKEN

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

—Psalm 22:1

It's the worst day of your life. You don't know why, but you snap. And you lash out. And you do the worst thing you have ever done. After that, everything is a blur. Police. County jail. Courtroom. Judge.

Then comes the second worst day of your life. Two corrections officers lead you into a low building. One, two, three steel-bar doors clang shut behind you. You've arrived. For the next 10, 20, even 30 years, this will be your home.

You know you did it. You know you deserve this. But you feel alone, completely alone. And abandoned. The psalm says it best. So you cry out, "God, why have you forsaken me?" But you'd better be careful. This is no time for tears. The next 10, 20, even 30 years will be no time for tears. Not in this place where God is so far away.

It was the worst day of Jesus's life. He was arrested, beaten, and condemned. Then he was nailed to a cross to die. His friends deserted him. His people turned against him. He was completely alone, abandoned. And from the pit of despair he cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Jesus knows what you are going through. And he will not abandon you. He will stay as close as your own breath.

God says, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). Jesus, help me to trust that, especially on the bad days. Amen.

A WEDDING TOAST

"Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!"
—Revelation 19:9

Many biblical psalms are about the king of Israel. Take Psalm 45. It was written for a king's wedding, probably by the master of ceremonies. He invites everyone to raise a glass. Then he begins with compliments like these: "My king, you are the most excellent of men. You are mighty and victorious, a conqueror of nations. And your lips, even your lips—I hope the bride is listening—your lips have been anointed with grace."

Wow! The king is quite the catch!

But then the emcee goes too far. Still singing the king's praises, he says, "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever" (v. 6). Do you hear that? He calls the king "God"! That can't be right. Whatever the literal words say, they have to mean something else, right?

There is no way that the king is God!

Well, hold on. Suppose Psalm 45 is about Jesus. He *is* the king of Israel, after all. And suppose Jesus fills that psalm with new meaning. He *is* God, after all. And suppose Jesus has a wedding of his own. He *is* the Lamb of God, after all. And at his wedding supper, it will make perfect sense for the emcee to raise a glass and say to him, "Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever." After all, Jesus *is* the King of kings and Lord of lords!

King Jesus, you are the most excellent of men. You conquered sin and death and set your people free. "Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever." Amen.

A POWERFUL VOICE

*[Jesus] rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!"
Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.*

—Mark 4:39

When I was a youngster, my dad was in the Coast Guard. He was often at sea for a month at a time. But he never talked about it. Reading Psalm 107 makes me wonder, "What did my dad and his shipmates go through when towering waves tossed their ship about like a toy?"

We blame ocean storms on the movement of weather systems. This psalm, on the other hand, blames those storms on God. It pictures God stirring up the wind and the waves with nothing more than a word. The point of that picture is that God is in control. Various forces may combine to create storms. But none of it happens outside of God's command and control. That's a basic biblical perspective on what it means for God to be God.

The fishermen among Jesus' disciples knew all about violent storms on the Sea of Galilee. During one of those storms, they were beside themselves with fear (see Mark 4:37-38). Imagine how stunned they were when Jesus, with nothing more than a word, calmed the wind and settled the sea. If God speaks to stir up the sea, who else but God would speak to quiet the sea?

The point? When Jesus speaks, it is the voice of God. We ought to listen to him, especially when life gets stormy.

Lord Jesus, whenever storms terrify us, calm us with your presence. And when the time is right, just say the word, and the storm will be over. Amen.

HEARD PRAYERS

[Jesus] offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. —Hebrews 5:7

Does God hear our prayers? Yes. Does God answer our prayers? Yes. Not always when we want. And not always the way we want. But we do have this assurance: “In all things God works for the good of those who love him” (Romans 8:28).

Psalm 70 is framed by a single plea: “God, hurry up and help me!” (see vv. 1, 5). The poet is in trouble. People want to kill him, or at least ruin him. So the poet pleads for God’s help, saying, in effect: “Give me a reason to rejoice. Give me a reason to praise you” (v. 4).

When I read this psalm, I imagine Jesus on the most difficult night of his life. He knows that a cross awaits him, so he prays. He pleads with God: “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will”

(Matthew 26:39). Three times he says that prayer. Minutes later he is arrested. The next morning he is nailed to a cross to die.

Did God hear Jesus’ prayer? Did God answer his prayer? Hebrews 5 says Jesus was heard because he submitted himself to the will of God. And God’s will was that Jesus would die. In the death of Jesus, God was working “for the good of those who love him.” How can we not love him?

God, when we pray, help us to remember that you gave Jesus for us, and help us to trust that you are always working for our good. Amen.

THE ANSWER TO THE SEARCH

We have [a high priest] who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.
—Hebrews 4:15

The philosopher Diogenes carried a lamp wherever he went, looking for an honest person. In the Bible, God conducts a similar search, looking for a good person.

First up, Noah. He is described as “a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time” (Genesis 6:9). But Noah turns out to be pretty much like everyone else, with a heart that inclines to evil. Another candidate is David. He is described as “a man after [God’s] own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14). But David behaves pretty much like every other king, with a string of crimes on his record.

It’s a frustrating search, leading Psalm 53 to conclude: “There is no one who does good, not even one” (v. 3). And that conclusion never changes. Not until God looks down from heaven and sees Jesus.

Jesus is truly righteous, blameless even. Jesus shares God’s heart, and he lives a life that pleases God from beginning to end. We all sin every day, doing things we shouldn’t do—sometimes things we don’t even want to do. But Jesus did not sin. Not once. Not ever.

Diogenes carried his lamp in the fourth century B.C. If only he could have waited about 400 years. He would have found what he was looking for—and what God was looking for too.

Holy Jesus, the search is over. You are everything God wants. You are everything we need. You are wonderful in every way. Amen.

SOMEONE TO COUNT ON

No matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ.
—2 Corinthians 1:20

When life is out of joint, we need someone to lead us through the chaos and confusion. Someone reliable. Someone we can count on. The Bible assures us that God is reliable. With God, "Yes" means yes and "No" means no. With God, promises are a sure thing. In other words, God is someone we can count on.

God made promises to King David: to love him forever, to make him the world's greatest king, and to preserve his royal line. But by the time of Psalm 89, David's royal line has known nothing but trouble. Reality is completely out of joint. Whatever happened to the promises?

Jesus was born into the royal line of King David. And he knew plenty of trouble. That trouble came to a head when he was crowned with thorns and nailed to a cross. A sign

over his head said, "The King of the Jews," just to rub it in. It looked like another dead end for David's line. What about the promises?

Well, the story didn't end there. Jesus rose from the dead! And forty days later he took his seat at the right hand of God the Father.

All authority in heaven and on earth belongs to Jesus. And he is King, now and forever.

That's what happened with the promises. And that's why we can count on God.

King Jesus, when life is out of joint, your story reminds us that we can count on God, who promised never to leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). Amen.

JESUS IS THE TRUE VINE

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener."

—John 15:1

Wild grapevines don't produce much fruit. But the vines in a vineyard are a different story. With careful management, they produce clusters of fruit, casks of wine, and a decent return on investment.

The Old Testament pictures the people of Israel as God's vineyard. But the investment doesn't pay off. Israel resists God's management and produces lousy fruit. So God cuts his losses and lets the vineyard go wild (see Isaiah 5:1-7).

Yet the story doesn't end there. Psalm 80 pictures Israel as a single vine that's barely hanging on. The psalm pleads, in effect, "God, the vine belongs to you. Take care of it!" From there, the psalm pushes harder: "God, the vine is your son. Won't you take care of your own son?" (See vv. 14-15.)

The psalm is looking back to Egypt, where God told Pharaoh, "Israel is my firstborn son. . . . Let my son go!" (Exodus 4:22-23). Just as God rescued Israel from Egypt, the psalm pleads with God to rescue them again.

From there, the psalm looks ahead to Jesus, because he is the true vine, the firstborn Son of God (see vv. 17-19). And now, by the Holy Spirit and through faith, we are united with Jesus. We have become branches of the true vine, who pours out his life like wine so that we can truly live.

Lord Jesus, sometimes I feel dry and lifeless, like nothing good can come from me. But with your life flowing through me, so much is possible! Thank you. Amen.

THE BIBLE'S WIDE-ANGLE LENS

I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

—Revelation 7:9

From one angle, the Bible tells an exclusive story about one God (the Lord), one man (Abraham), one nation (Israel), one Savior (Jesus), one people (the church). And who doesn't want to be part of something exclusive?

But exclusive can be uncomfortable. While we're on the inside looking out, we may get queasy seeing people on the outside looking in. Unless we're looking down on them.

There is another angle in the Bible, though. From this angle, it's not just a "one nation (Israel)" story. Psalm 87, for example, celebrates God's exclusive love for Zion, the heart of Israel. But then it also pictures God welcoming other nations and saying of them, "This one was born in Zion."

This angle widens in the New Testament. In Matthew 2, Magi

come from faraway nations to worship the child Jesus. In Matthew 28, Jesus sends out his followers with good news for all nations. And in Revelation 7 we see a vision of a vast multitude from "every nation, tribe, people and language" worshipping God in heaven.

The wide-angle view paints a wonderfully inclusive picture of God's love. From this angle, the only thing exclusive is Jesus. He alone is the Lamb of God. And he takes away the sin of not just one nation but the whole world!

Lord Jesus, no person, family, or nation is beyond the reach of your love. Your love is as wide and long and high and deep as all the world. We praise you! Amen.

FOOTPRINTS

Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen. —Psalm 77:19

West Michigan winters can be gloomy. By early January, we're remembering the green of last spring, the warmth of last summer, and the blazing colors of last fall. Memories of bright days can help us to endure dark ones.

Psalm 77 is set during a dark time. But the memory of brighter days keeps hope alive. The brightest memory recalls Israel's escape from slavery in Egypt hundreds of years earlier, and especially how God cleared a path for them through the waters of the Red Sea (vv. 16-18).

But there's something else to that memory. The psalm says, in effect, "God, in those days we saw what you were doing for us. But we didn't see you directly. The damp seabed didn't show your footprints. We could only see Moses and Aaron leading the way like good shepherds" (see vv. 19-20).

Well, many years later, in the person of Jesus, God took on human flesh. Jesus, the Son of God, was visible—feet, hands, and all. He left footprints. When we look at Jesus, we can see God. We see God going before us, leading the way.

The path that Jesus follows leads to the darkness of death. But he doesn't turn aside. He is our good shepherd. He lays down his life for us. And we can see his feet, and his hands, nailed to the cross. When we see that, we know he loves us, even on the darkest days.

Jesus, in the gloom of winter, you lead the way. In the warmth of summer, you lead the way. Help us to see your footprints and to follow you every day. Amen.

THE VOICE OF THE LORD

The voice of the LORD twists the oaks and strips the forests bare.
—Psalm 29:9

The voice of the Lord features prominently in the Bible, from “Let there be . . . !” in Genesis 1 to “I am coming soon!” in Revelation 22. Like any voice, the voice of the Lord can whisper or shout. In 1 Kings 19, a gentle voice consoles the prophet Elijah, whose spirit is in turmoil. Psalm 29 describes a roaring voice that rips forests apart.

The voice of the Lord speaks to Jesus when he is baptized. It says, “You are my Son, whom I love” (Mark 1:11). That’s an echo of Psalm 2 and Isaiah 42. And it assigns a destiny to Jesus. He will be a king who rules as a servant. Jesus embraces that destiny in obedient, faithful trust.

In Psalm 29 the powerful voice of the Lord breaks cedars in pieces, “twists the oaks,” and “strips the forests bare.” Following the voice that calls

to him, Jesus himself will be stripped bare and twisted. He will be broken in pieces on a tree. Crowned with thorns, he will be God’s suffering servant, the Savior of the world.

The voice of the Lord still speaks. If we listen carefully, we can hear it. From the cross the voice of the Lord whispers, “This is what power looks like.”

Lord Jesus, you heard the voice of God, and you followed. When we hear your voice, help us to follow too. Amen.

SATURDAY

At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid.

... They laid Jesus there.

—John 19:41-42

Jesus was put to death on a Friday. And he rose from the dead on the following Sunday. The Bible tells us quite a bit about those two days, which we now call Good Friday and Easter Sunday. But what about the in-between day, Holy Saturday? The Bible says next to nothing about it.

That leaves us to wonder. What was going on with Jesus on Saturday? He was dead. His lifeless body lay in a stone tomb. We tend to assume that his spirit was now with God in heaven, or paradise, as Jesus implied while he was dying on the cross (Luke 23:43, 46). But we aren't told anything more.

On Saturday, while Jesus' body lay dead, was his spirit aware, even alert? I wonder if Psalm 13 drifted through his mind, as if to say, "Father, if you don't open my eyes, I will sleep

forever in death! If you don't open my eyes, my enemies will have won!"

But the psalm doesn't end there. It turns to focus on God's love and salvation. Did Jesus' spirit then also say, "But I trust in your unfailing love"? And as darkness surrendered to light on Sunday morning, did Jesus praise his Father with more words from this psalm: "My heart rejoices in your salvation"?

Maybe Jesus gives more meaning to this psalm than we have realized.

Jesus, everything was created through you, in you, and for you. It's no wonder that all of Scripture, including Psalm 13, points to you. We praise you, the living Word of God. Amen.

THE MORE EXCELLENT WAY

The one whose walk is blameless will minister to me.

—Psalm 101:6

Psalm 101 doesn't make me think of Jesus—not at first. The poet sounds proud of his personal holiness. He seems a bit full of himself. "I will be careful to lead a blameless life," he says (v. 2).

From there, the poet expresses all the ways he will distance himself from people who don't measure up to his standards. And it's not just a passive distancing. He intends to drive unworthy people away (v. 8). And he will only exchange hospitality with people who are faithful, like himself (v. 6).

This is when I start thinking of Jesus. Because Jesus fills out the meaning of this psalm by turning it on its head.

The Pharisee in Luke 7 might well have had a special affection for Psalm 101. He certainly limited his hospitality. Apparently even Jesus didn't

measure up! The Pharisee provided no water to wash Jesus' feet (v. 44), no kiss to greet him (v. 45), and no oil to anoint him (v. 46).

But Jesus welcomed tears and kisses and perfume from a woman who was considered unworthy. And when he offered the generous hospitality of forgiveness, it brought forth an outpouring of love from the woman.

Jesus, the blameless one, ministered not only to the woman but also to his proud host. Jesus' way is the more excellent way.

Jesus, may your mercy always summon an outpouring of love from me—and not just for people who might seem worthy. Amen.

JESUS SHINES

The LORD wraps himself in light as with a garment.

—Psalm 104:2

Some people are afraid of the dark. Who knows what's hiding around the corner or down the stairs? On the Bible's first page in Genesis 1, the world is a dark and scary place. Who knows what's hiding in the unseen depths? Then God says, "Let there be light," and puts darkness in its place (Genesis 1:3-4).

From Genesis 1 to Revelation 22, the Bible connects light closely with God. In Revelation 22, we learn that residents of the New Jerusalem won't need lamps or even the sun because "the Lord God will give them light" (Revelation 22:5).

This connection between God and light shows up in the story of Jesus when a mysterious event changes his appearance. His face shines "like the sun," and his clothes become "as white as the light" (Matthew 17:2). Amazing!

From multiple angles, the gospel writers seek to answer the question "Who is Jesus?" His shining appearance sends a bright signal that Jesus is God, who "wraps himself in light as with a garment" (Psalm 104:2).

The world can still be a dark and scary place—and not just at night. But here's some good news. Wherever the light of Jesus shines, it puts darkness in its place. And it helps us not to be afraid.

Lord Jesus, shine all over the world! Shine in dark corners, and chase shadows away. Shine in troubled hearts, and set us free from fear. Amen.

CALM AND QUIET*I have calmed and quieted myself.*

—Psalm 131:2

Stress levels keep rising. At work, at school, even at home, the pressure is on. Productivity targets climb. Housing bubbles burst. Viruses run out of control. Who can calm down? Who can relax?

Well, maybe I can take a cue from Psalm 131 and not concern myself with things above my pay grade. Maybe I can imagine myself as a toddler snuggling against my mother's warmth, the gentle rhythm of her breathing soothing me. Ahhh. Can I just stay here?

When Jesus was a toddler, he and his family were refugees in Egypt. What a lot they had experienced! Visits by smelly shepherds and stargazing foreigners. A close escape from Herod's hit squad. And then months turning into years while they lived as strangers in a strange land.

Yet we can imagine Mary picking up Jesus and wrapping him in her arms. And we can imagine Jesus finding comfort from her warmth and her steady breathing. Out of place in Egypt, threatened back home—none of that was a concern for little Jesus, who rested quietly in his mother's embrace.

The psalm and Jesus himself invite us to snuggle against the warmth of God's presence, to rest in God's embrace, to trust God when the pressure is on, to trust God like Jesus trusted his mother's arms.

It can be hard to calm down, Jesus. Too much is too scary and too far beyond me. With hope in God, help me to share a quiet rest with you. Amen.

RISKY BUSINESS

[The Lord's angels] will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.
—Psalm 91:12

Some people are risk-takers. They climb mountains. They fight fires. They have children. They follow Jesus. People may take a risk for the adrenaline rush. Or because something compels them: a principle, a duty, a commitment.

In today's Scripture, the devil pushes Jesus to take a risk. While Jesus stands at the highest point of the temple, the devil whispers in his ear, "Go ahead. Jump off!" Then the devil recites a verse from Psalm 91. That psalm is all about God protecting the people who trust in him. So it's a test for Jesus: "Do you trust God to protect you? Then prove it!"

Well, of course Jesus trusts God. But there is more to it than that. You see, it's never right to say, "I'm going to do something foolish just to test God's protection." So Jesus tells the devil to take a leap—well,

not exactly. He responds to the devil's craftiness by quoting another text: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

Jesus is already in the middle of a bigger risk. He is facing off against the devil. And that is dangerous. Human beings have a lousy track record in those confrontations. But the Spirit has sent him into battle. So Jesus takes the risk and confronts the devil head-on. He does it with confidence, because he trusts God to protect him. With Psalm 91 to encourage him, Jesus doesn't fall or fail.

Jesus, help me to trust you enough to take the risk of following you. Even when that looks foolish, it's still the wisest thing to do. Amen.

WHAT'S IN THE NAME

"You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."
—Matthew 1:21

We all have times when we choose our own way instead of God's way. That's when we need Psalm 130. This psalm is a prayer for personal forgiveness. "God, I really messed up this time! I can't sleep because of my sins. So I keep watching for some sign that you forgive me."

We all commit personal sins. But those sins don't stand alone. Every personal sin is embedded within a larger web of sinfulness. That sinfulness infects families, orchestras, and baseball teams. It infects prisons and police departments, courtrooms and classrooms. It infects zoning laws, constitutions, and gang culture.

Psalm 130 reflects this bigger picture. It may start with personal sins, but it moves on to the sinfulness that has infected Israel as a nation. That sinfulness troubles Israel from their time of slavery in Egypt all the

way to their exile in Babylon! Israel needs to be saved from this sinfulness. And there is only one hope. The psalm ends on that note: "[The Lord] himself will redeem Israel from all their sins" (v. 8).

The angel of the Lord speaks of this hope when he tells Mary what to name her baby. "Jesus" means "the Lord saves." But not only will Jesus save Israel; he will also take away the sin of the world (John 1:29). And that includes me and you, personally.

Lord Jesus, thank you for dealing with my personal sins, with all the ways I mess up. Thank you even more that you take away the sin of the world! Amen.

THE PLACE TO BE

Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover.
—Luke 2:41

Pilgrims used to sing Psalm 122 on their way to Jerusalem. Nowadays people go to New York for entertainment, to Rome for beauty, and to Paris for romance. In the biblical world, Jerusalem was the place to be. It was “the city of the Great King” (Psalm 48:2), where God was enthroned in the temple. At festival time, all the tribes of Israel would go up to Jerusalem to glorify God.

Starting when he was just a boy, Jesus joined the annual Passover pilgrimage. Can you picture him in the crowd? A smile stretches across his face as he sings this psalm. He’s anticipating the sights and sounds of the city. Jerusalem is the place to be.

As an adult, Jesus continued to visit Jerusalem regularly. Each of those visits seemed to stir up opposition. Eventually the city became a dangerous place for

Jesus, a place to die. But that didn’t stop him. He still went up to Jerusalem one last time to celebrate the Passover. But that wasn’t the only reason.

Jesus also had several appointments to keep there: one with the ruling council, one with the Roman governor, and one with a cross. So, for Jesus, Jerusalem was the place to be. And that was for our benefit. So we can rejoice that he went up to Jerusalem.

Jesus, we are so grateful that you went up to Jerusalem. You embraced the cross and its shame for the sake of sinners like us. Thank you. Amen.

IDOLS AND IMAGES

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

We don't talk about idols much these days. And when we do, it's probably about a pop superstar or an *American Idol* winner. But when the Bible talks about idols, it usually means carved images that stood in for false gods. The Bible issues strong warnings about that sort of idol.

On their own, idols are powerless. As Psalm 115 says, they may have eyes and ears and hands and feet, but they cannot see, hear, feel, or walk! Yet when people worship idols, they give power to them, destructive power. That's why, for example, the Bible warns against greed. Greed makes an idol out of wealth. And when wealth is worshiped, it has the power to turn people into misers or mobsters or market frauds. False gods, and their images, are dangerous!

But then there is Jesus. Jesus is *the* image of God. That's why

he can say, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). And that's not about his eyes, ears, hands, or feet. It's about power. Because when we see Jesus, we see the Father's love. And there is power in that love. It's the power that saves the world. It's the power that makes us what we were always meant to be: not idols, but images of our heavenly Father. And, remember, that's more about love than looks!

Jesus, you are "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Hebrews 1:3). That's why we want to see you and, seeing you, to be changed. Amen.

ONE IS THE NUMBER

"I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one. . . ." —John 17:20-21

Psalm 133 expresses a beautiful but often disappointed hope. It says, "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity." If only. Truth is, many of us struggle even to hold our families together! Old Testament Israel was the same way. They were twelve tribes who made up one family. But they fell apart and never came back together. The hope of the psalm crumbled.

When Jesus gathers the church, he prays that we will be one people, one family. Someday his prayer will be fulfilled, when the people of God become "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language" (Revelation 7:9). But for now the church is broken. The prayer is unfulfilled. Yet there are signs of hope, flashes of beauty.

I am the pastor of an unusual church in West Michigan. Our members live in two different worlds. Many are convicted felons. They live behind the walls and fences of several state prisons. But many other members live on the outside, in the "ordinary" world. Every week we gather together as one church. We pray, we study, we worship, we visit, we share stories—because we belong to Jesus together, and we love each other.

Jesus brings our church together. He may bring your family together too. Ask him.

Jesus, we're sorry for all the brokenness in the church and in our families. Please heal us. Please make us whole. For the glory of God, Amen.

FULLY KNOWN

[Elizabeth] exclaimed [to Mary]: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!" —Luke 1:42

Psalm 139 celebrates the intimacy of God's connection with an individual human being. Just imagine—God knows you completely. God knows everything that can break your heart, and everything that can make your heart skip a beat. How wonderful! Of course, God also knows your selfish daydreams and dark desires. How scary! No wonder the psalm ends like this: "See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (v. 24).

God's intimate connection with you stretches back to the time before you were born, to the time before you were even conceived. God knows you completely: from start to finish, from top to bottom, inside and out. And God loves you completely. How wonderful!

But the psalm takes on more meaning when Jesus says the

words "You knit me together in my mother's womb." Just imagine—the Holy Spirit overshadows the virgin Mary, and the Son of God begins to take shape within her. Talk about intimacy! The One who gave life *to* Mary is now receiving life *from* Mary. The One who loved Mary before *she* was born is now loved by Mary before *he* is born.

Mary is blessed, blessed among all women, to receive the gift of this child. And the child is blessed, blessed among all children, to receive the gift of life through this mother.

Holy Lord Jesus, it's such a gift to be known by you and loved by you. I want to know you in return, and to love you forever. Amen.

GOD IS ENOUGH

Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.
—Psalm 73:25

Sometimes there is too much wrong in this world! The economy takes your job. Cancer takes your spouse. The river takes your home. Yet even when so much is wrong, God is enough.

But some people skate through life. They seem to have no troubles at all. Their kids run faster. Their jobs pay better. Their dreams shine brighter. And they act like they deserve it, but they don't. It's just wrong! Yet even when so much is wrong, God is enough.

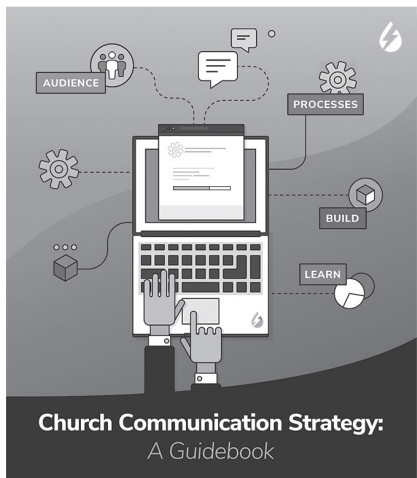
It helps to remember Jesus: accused by his own people, abandoned by his closest friends, stripped naked and nailed to a cross. It was all so wrong! So wrong that the sun quit shining and Jesus cried out, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:33-34). Yet even then, God was enough.

Psalm 73 is a long prayer about how there is too much wrong in this world. It's a complaint, until the psalmist gains a new perspective. Then the prayer takes a turn: "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you." In other words, even when so much is wrong, God, you are enough.

At the end of his rope, Jesus releases himself to God: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). Because even when so much is wrong, God is enough.

Lord God, whom do I have in heaven but you?
And besides you, there is nothing on earth I desire.
Let that be my prayer,
because you are enough.
Amen.

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