



Today

July/Aug 2021

refresh, refocus, renew

'DON'T BE AFRAID'

ALSO: LIVING OUR FAITH

Dear Friends:

What is faith? According to the dictionary, *faith* is “complete trust or confidence in someone or something.” For a Christian definition, we could add that *faith* is “strong belief in God and the teachings of Christianity, based on spiritual understanding rather than proof.” And perhaps an equally important question is “What does faith look like in action?”



For the month of July, Pastor Harvey Kiekoover draws on his many years as a missionary, pastor, and chaplain to illustrate living faith. Through stories of ordinary people whose faith strengthened his own faith, he challenges us to live out our faith in honor to God.

In August, Pastor Bret Lamsma explores Bible passages dealing with fear and being afraid. These passages shed light on what we fear, and they help us to live into Jesus' kind command “Don't be afraid.” The Bible also often reminds us that we should “fear” (respect, honor, adore, and worship) God. This fear of God provides great comfort, assuring us that God our Savior is in control and will never leave or forsake us or the world he has made.

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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**“Living Our Faith”
Harvey Kiecover**



**“ ‘Don’t Be Afraid’ ”
Bret Lamsma**

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**ReFrame
Ministries**

is the new name of
Back to God Ministries International

Living Our Faith

Harvey Kiekoover

july

In Luke 18:8, Jesus asks, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” How would you answer Jesus’ question?

In July, Harvey Kiekoover reflects on his experiences as a missionary teacher in Nigeria, as a church pastor in the United States, and later as a nursing home chaplain. The people he writes about are ordinary Christians whose faith has encouraged him in his faith walk. May these stories encourage you as well!

Harvey Kiekoover grew up on a Michigan farm and studied to go into pastoral ministry. He served as a teacher in Nigeria and as a pastor and chaplain in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He and his wife became the parents of three sons, and he enjoys spending time with his six grandchildren.

‘Don’t Be Afraid’

Bret Lamsma

august

This month we will take a look at some of the passages in the Bible that deal with fear and being afraid. Through story and lesson we will wonder together why we fear what we do and why we don’t need to live in fear. We will also realize that while Jesus tells us to not fear the things of this world, he reminds us to fear (respect, honor, adore, and worship) his Father, our Creator God. As we examine fear, we will find that we can always trust that God our Savior is in control and holding on to us.

Bret Lamsma is director of faith formation at a church in Denver, Colorado, and has served churches in Michigan and California in youth and intergenerational ministries. Bret and his wife, Julie, have two children, and together they enjoy hiking, camping, and visiting national parks.

FAITH—SEEING JESUS

“Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?”
—Matthew 25:37

A friend made a gift for me that I treasure. It's a small, neatly stained block of wood on which he glued several little pieces of wood. When I show it to people, it puzzles many of them. They see nothing meaningful in this block of wood. Others look at it, and their faces brighten as they “get it.” The little pieces are arranged in such a way that they spell “JESUS.” But you can see the name only if you look at the block a certain way. It reminds me that Jesus can be with us even when we don't see him.

A missionary colleague in Nigeria helped me to “see” Jesus. As we stood under the hot sun in the middle of Africa, he pointed to the door of the small building where he kept an office and said, “Harvey, sometimes I find it hard to know if it's Jesus I see at that door.”

No one was there at that moment, but many people had come up to that door, and others would be coming—to ask for help with school fees or hospital bills or transportation costs or other needs. So the question often crossed his mind: Is this a request from Jesus?

It isn't easy to know. His response? “I would rather make the mistake of thinking this was a request from Jesus, even if it wasn't—than to think it wasn't but it was!” He was remembering Jesus' words in our Scripture reading for today.

Am I willing to look in such a way that I can see Jesus when someone asks for help?

Lord, may our love for you enable us to see that we can serve you as we attend to others. Amen.

FAITH—BEING A NEIGHBOR

“Which of these . . . was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”
—Luke 10:36

We stood on our back steps, huddled in fearful uncertainty. Our steward’s wife, shaking with fright, had just reported to us: “Terrible things are happening in the city.”

It was September 21, 1967, in Makurdi, Nigeria. The news was indeed terrible. During the night violence had erupted downtown. Shops were looted, homes were destroyed, and a hundred people of the Igbo tribe were slaughtered.

Included in the group on our steps was a young Igbo man who took care of our yard. I can still see his eyes, wide with fear. It was his tribe, his people, that were being killed. He was in danger. We needed to do something to protect him. But what?

Our young Tiv steward became the neighbor that Jesus calls us to be. Compassion

and concern overruled his fear as he offered a suggestion: “I know a path through the field that leads to the rail station. I think I can get him there safely.”

We could think of no better option. Our Igbo friend quickly gathered his goods and prepared himself to go. We gathered again on our steps for a prayerful goodbye. And then off they went—the two of them together.

We hurt deeply for our young Igbo friend. But our young steward showed us what it means to be a neighbor—crossing tribal lines and status boundaries. Jesus says, “Go and do likewise.”

Lord, thank you for the “good Samaritans” in our lives. Move us to be true neighbors. Amen.

FAITH—FINDING HELP IN TROUBLE

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

—Psalm 46:1

For more than 3,000 years the hearts of God's people have been encouraged and bolstered by the words of Psalm 46. In our troubled times we still turn to this psalm. May I share with you about three experiences when this psalm strengthened our troubled hearts?

First, the awful news on November 22, 1963: "President Kennedy has been shot." We were stunned, numbed into silence. At the seminary I was attending we had a special chapel service, and our professor read Psalm 46: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." Those words made our weak and wounded hearts sturdier.

Second, during the past year with the COVID-19 pandemic, Psalm 46 spoke to many of our troubled and lonely hearts. In times of anx-

ious uncertainty and isolation, we needed to hear God say, "Be still, and know that I am God," anchoring and calming our souls.

Third, I visited a dear mother whose son had just been killed in a car accident. A tearful smile lined her sad face as she welcomed me into her neatly kept home. She talked. I listened. Then we turned to Psalm 46—"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." In later visits she often reminded me how powerful and precious Psalm 46 was to her.

"Therefore we will not fear. . . . The LORD almighty is with us. . . ."

Thank you, O God, for being our ever-present help in trouble. Amen.

FAITH—OVERCOMING EVIL

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

—Romans 12:21

It began as a peaceful march to protest the brutal killing of George Floyd. But as the darkness deepened, it became a dark night of riotous behavior. Images of angry people smashing store fronts, of police cars ablaze, and of businesses going up in flames brought me to my knees in earnest prayer and disturbed my anxious sleep. What I saw was bad, frightening, evil.

In the morning I checked the news. The rioters were gone, but they had left a disturbing mess: smashed windows, burned cars, vile graffiti, sad ruins in the heart of the city.

A reporter surveying the damage approached a young mother with two children. He asked, “Why are you here this morning?” She said, “We saw the news; we decided that this city needs someone to show the love of God.”

Others were there too—sweeping up the glass shards, trying to restore order to chaos. The mom and her children, who were about 5 and 7 years old, were there with brushes and soap, trying to erase stubborn graffiti. They brought some light into the darkness, some of God’s love into a broken place where the evidence of evil was very real.

In that mother and her little ones, I saw the presence of Jesus. She and her children were being the church, Christ’s body—overcoming evil by doing good. As I watched, warm and grateful tears welled up from within me in a prayer of thanks to God.

Lord, give us the faith, courage, and strength to overcome evil by doing good in our broken world. Amen.

FAITH—GIVING GENEROUSLY

Their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. —2 Corinthians 8:2-3

A Nigerian neighbor came knocking at our door. He had come a couple of weeks earlier too. At that time he had pleaded for a job that would bring him some needed cash to support his family. The task I gave him was beneficial but not essential. Every morning, with digging tools in hand, he was there, smoothing out some rough places in our yard and making them plain.

But on the morning when he came again, it wasn't digging tools he had in hand. It was a chicken—a live one! In the Hausa language he said something like, "For you, sir. Thank you for giving me a job to do. I want you to have this chicken."

I pictured that chicken—one of a tiny flock picking up scraps of food and blades of grass on the compound. I could picture our neighbor telling his son to

catch that chicken so that he could bring it to our home. He didn't have chickens to spare, but there he stood—with a chicken to give to us.

How gracious! How generous! Out of his own meager resources, this brother in Christ generously gave—even beyond his ability. He was like the Macedonians, who embodied the grace of giving. I was humbled by his generosity—and even troubled! Such grace!

Lord, you have richly and graciously blessed us. Please give us a spirit of joy and gladness that gratefully blesses others in our giving. In Christ, Amen.

FAITH—LEARNING TO RECEIVE

It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. . . . —Ephesians 2:8

We all like to receive gifts, right? For example, think of children on Christmas morning. They eagerly dig through gifts under the Christmas tree to find one with their name on it. Adults may hide their excitement, but they also like to receive gifts, don't they?

Reflecting some more on yesterday's story, I have to say I really struggled with how I should respond to our Nigerian neighbor who had come with the gift of a live chicken.

What should I do? I knew my neighbor needed that chicken far more than we did. He struggled to make ends meet.

So, as kindly as I could, I thanked him for his generosity. Then I said something like "But, friend, you need that chicken for your family. I can't accept a chicken from you."

So, without the chicken, I went back into the house. I told our steward what had happened. He furrowed his brow, looked me in the eye, and said, "You did the wrong thing! You refused his gift."

That stung. But he was right; I had done the wrong thing. Humbled, I went out to my neighbor, apologized to him, and accepted the chicken.

I needed that humbling lesson. It takes grace to receive, a willingness not to be in control.

Isn't that what salvation is all about? We recognize our need for God's gift of grace—and we receive it. And in receiving new life, how blessed we are!

We need the gift of your grace, O Lord. Give us the grace to receive your amazing gifts humbly and gratefully. Amen.

FAITH—SHARING TEARS

Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.

—Romans 12:15

It had been a difficult morning for my wife. The dreadful, disabling effects of her multiple sclerosis were too real to deny. She felt the bruising weight of it all. We lived with good, caring neighbors in our assigned location in northern Nigeria. They showed that they cared.

That morning two of the neighbor women kindly checked in on Thelma. The first neighbor who came saw that it was a difficult day for her. Thelma couldn't conceal her struggle. As they talked, tears welled up; they erupted into open crying. Quickly and with obvious discomfort, the well-meaning neighbor responded to her tears with the words, "Don't cry, Thelma; don't cry." Thelma forced herself to stifle her sobs.

Shortly after that neighbor left, a second kind neighbor came. She also observed that it was

a difficult morning for Thelma. The tears may have been choked back, but they were still there, and they rose again. The neighbor saw them, and, wrapping her arm around my wife's shoulder, she said, "Cry, Thelma; just cry."

As Thelma described the experience to me, I knew what she found helpful. It was a good lesson for me.

Just as Paul wrote in Romans 12, we can rejoice with those who rejoice, but we can also weep with those who weep. That's real caring as we try to be a neighbor—the kind God wants and enables us to be.

God, our Father, thank you for being the Father of compassion. Mold and shape us today into your compassionate likeness. Amen.

FAITH—PRAYING EFFECTIVELY

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

—James 5:16

A Nigerian pastoral leader came to visit us one day. He had attended a meeting of the college's board of trustees. Before rushing back home, he insisted on a visit to our home.

I recognized the imposing figure as he stepped out of the car and approached our door—this strong, gifted pastor. We greeted each other warmly and stepped into our living room, where my wife joined us in her motorized chair.

After a few common-courtesy questions about our family, our work, and our health, the pastor became earnest. He had heard about our situation; he knew we were struggling. My wife's multiple sclerosis was making life more and more challenging. He was deeply concerned.

He had come to be a pastor to us. In the Hausa language he asked if he might pray

with us. Of course he could. Approaching my wife's chair, the elderly pastor went to his knees, took her hands in his, and poured out his soul in an earnest prayer for my wife, for me, for our sons.

It was moving, beautiful, heart-warming. Effective? My wife still had MS. But we knew we had been brought into the presence of God by this praying servant of God. Our courage was renewed. The prayer of a righteous Nigerian pastor was movingly effective in our lives. God is good—we tasted it afresh as the pastor prayed for us.

Lord, thank you for people with the gift of prayer, and that the prayers of a righteous person are powerful and effective. In Jesus, Amen.

FAITH—FORGIVING AS FORGIVEN

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

—Matthew 6:12

Jesus taught his followers this prayer, and it is often called “The Lord’s Prayer.” But it is a prayer that Jesus didn’t need to pray. He had no debts or sins for which he needed forgiveness. His disciples did, though, so he taught them this prayer. We also need this prayer, don’t we?

Acknowledging that we need forgiveness is not easy. But look at the last part of this request: “. . . as we also have forgiven our debtors.” I sometimes wonder, “If God were to forgive us as we forgive others, how forgiven would we be?”

A difficult experience we had in Nigeria makes me think about this prayer. The steward we hired was a trusted part of our family. He knew our ways, including the place where we hid the key for our cash drawer. We caught him one

day—almost in the act of taking money from the drawer.

Even so, he denied it—strongly. Then later, but not willingly, he admitted what he had done. He begged us to forgive his “debt.” It was not easy to forgive. We were hurt and grieved. Did he deserve forgiveness? But what about us—did *we* deserve God’s forgiveness for our sins?

We prayed. We sought the advice of a wise Nigerian friend. We were led to forgive our steward, and he continued to work for us.

Lord, we are debtors. Forgive us our debts. Shape us into forgivers who also dare to pray the rest of this petition: “. . . as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Amen.

FAITH—BEYOND KNOWLEDGE

Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." —Matthew 22:37

I have had many good teachers, but one was quite remarkable. Students who sat in his classroom knew they were privileged. He spoke quietly but with a depth, precision, and clarity that made listening almost irresistible. I enjoyed learning from this theological and philosophical giant.

Decades later our paths crossed again. I became his pastor, but I was still his student. We also shared the sad experience of needing to visit our spouse at a nursing home. We saw each other frequently on those visits. Occasionally he would also invite me to his apartment for a chat.

We often discussed theological matters, talking about God. But one night I remember him pausing. A thoughtful look lined his face, his wise eyes brightened, and he spoke earnestly: "Harvey, here we sit,

talking about God. But, you know, as we talk about God, we must remember that he is right here with us, hearing what we are saying."

It was a good reminder for me. Discerning and discussing basic truths about God may be helpful, even important, but lots of knowledge without love is nothing. God wants us to know *him*, to *love* him—with all our heart and soul and mind! That's the greatest commandment!

I am grateful for my respected and wise friend. He knew much about God—but, better by far, he knew God and loved him, with his heart and soul and mind.

Spirit of God, create in us hearts that love the Lord.
Amen.

FAITH—HOW WE LOOK AT THINGS

Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.
—Matthew 6:33

In the atrium of our church one Sunday, I noticed one of our senior members standing quietly. His face wasn't happy, but it was welcoming. I understood the look of tiredness and concern he showed. His wife was in a memory-care center. His own health was not robust. And yet he was there, at church among the worshipers.

I reached out to shake his hand and asked, "How are you doing?" His less-than-enthusiastic response: "Okay, I guess." After a pause he stated bluntly, "I don't care about anything anymore." Surprised, I asked, "Nothing?"

He shifted a bit and then said, "There was a time when I liked boats and cars and lots of things. I got excited about them. But they don't mean anything to me anymore."

I began to understand. Material things no longer grabbed his attention. Desire for stuff no longer preoccupied him. As his wife lost her ability to relate to others, and as she increasingly depended on others to care for her needs, he had grown to know the wearing and wearying effects of caring for her. His perspective on life had changed. Things decreased in importance, and relationships—with God, with family, with church—became his priority. This brother was learning more deeply the meaning of seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. His quiet strength was heartwarming.

Lord Jesus, your words are wise and liberating. Thank you for the peace and strength of seeking your kingdom. Amen.

FAITH—KNOWING TRANSGRESSIONS

I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.

—Psalm 51:3

On Monday nights I visited a woman in the nursing home who had already lived more than a century. With an expectant look and a heartwarming smile, she welcomed me to her half of the room she shared with another resident.

Her mind and memory were sharp, but her hearing was fading. When I spoke loudly and “e-nun-ci-at-ed” clearly, she could catch what I said.

Often as she reminisced about farm life and mothering a large family, I saw a woman of faith and quiet courage. She knew the Lord. She loved Jesus and had devoted herself to serve him.

Before leaving, I would ask her what Bible passage she wanted me to read. She was always ready with her request.

It puzzled me that occasionally she would ask me to read

Psalm 51, today’s Scripture reading. This psalm is about recognizing the deepness of our sin and how much we need to be forgiven. I felt a little uncomfortable reading this psalm with her. Why would this godly woman who loved the Lord so consistently ask me to read this psalm?

She would answer, “Because I know my transgressions.” They were real to her. She didn’t minimize sin. It broke her heart—with a repentance that pleases God (v. 17). And God healed her broken heart. He loved her with his forgiving love. He made her whole. She knew his peace and loved him.

Lord, we are sinners in need of a Savior. Thank you for giving us your only Son, Jesus, that we may be forgiven. Amen.

FAITH—SINGING “JESUS LOVES ME”

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.”

—John 15:9

A small, subdued group huddled together on a cemetery hillside on a lovely spring day. We had gathered to bury the remains of a dear mother.

I led the brief committal service. We were honest about the very real loss that this death meant for us. We read Scripture passages reminding us of the living hope we have in the living Savior to whom we belong—body and soul, in life and in death. We said a prayer in which we committed the spirit of this mother to God and her ashes to this spot in the earth.

As we ended the service, I invited the group to sing a song that I knew the mother's daughter with special needs loved to sing: “Jesus Loves Me.” It was beautiful, unforgettable! As the daughter led us in the singing, her voice sounded

out across the cemetery and into the wide spaces beyond.

She could sing this song, even here at her mother's burial, because she knew its truth: “Jesus loves me! This I know, for the Bible tells me so. . . .”

The Bible does tell us so. Jesus himself said so: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.”

I hope you know Jesus' love and can sing this song too—with a heart as confident and full as that dearly loved daughter had on that cemetery hillside.

Jesus, you love us. You said so. Because you do, we love you too. Move us to warmhearted thanks today for this profound truth. Amen.

FAITH—CONFESSING TO EACH OTHER

Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.

—Ephesians 4:25

“Speak truthfully to your neighbor,” says Paul in our text for today.

Does that mean we say nothing but the truth? The whole truth? Does that include what Jesus’ brother James tells us to do: “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed” (James 5:16)?

A young friend reflected with me about a sermon he had heard. He said, “A lot of what the pastor talked about is the need to be vulnerable because in doing so we can often find healing and growth.” Then he added, “I have never been one to put on pretenses, and I tend to be open about my faults with others.”

Then he said, “But my Christian friends don’t seem to like it when I admit faults to them. I’m not sure why this is, and I

wish they understood my motive in doing so. I think that we need not only to be vulnerable as believers but also to allow others to be open with us about their faults. I think there are a lot of people who don’t understand the value in this.”

I think Paul and James agree with my young friend. If we put off falsehood and spoke truthfully, we would shed pretenses and confess to each other, wouldn’t we? Real “communion of saints” is possible if we are Christlike—loving, caring, gracious, forgiving.

We say, “Confession is good for the soul.” It is, and it is good for the body too—Christ’s body, the church.

Jesus, we pray for the healing that comes from truthful confession. In your name, Amen.

FAITH—FORGIVING FROM THE HEART

“Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?”
—Matthew 18:21

With considerable personal discomfort, I share today’s thoughts with you.

At the age of 29, my wife mentioned that her knees felt numb. Neither of us was greatly concerned. But we were naïve: that was the beginning of a very challenging journey. The numbness was a symptom of multiple sclerosis. As her symptoms became more troublesome, we knew there was a serious problem. She needed an arm to lean on when climbing stairs; her vision doubled; her stamina decreased. As the years became decades of loss, her description was sadly apt: “I am dying by inches.”

To say that we struggled is an understatement. My wife did, our family did, I did. And I wasn’t always the loving and caring husband I should have been and had promised to be.

One evening, as we were visiting in the nursing home that was her “home” for eight years, I knew I had to speak about this uncomfortable truth with her. Why on that evening? I don’t know, but I’m convinced God’s Spirit was at work. So I said, “Thelma, there were times I didn’t treat you well. I was impatient, unkind, and unloving far too often. I am very sorry.”

Her response amazed me: “I don’t remember that.” She had not only forgiven; she had forgotten! How gracious, loving, kind, and generous! And healing. She forgave as Jesus calls us to—from the heart. I thank her, and I thank God.

Lord, thank you for people who forgive well. Please help us to be forgivers too. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

FAITH—FACING REGRETS

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. —1 John 1:9

As I entered the long hall of the nursing floor, I saw a special friend, her small frame dwarfed by her wheelchair. She had lost some of her stature, but her sharp mind was up to a challenge any time we talked. My heart warmed in seeing her again.

As I greeted her, I saw that her face was twisted in grief; tears flowed down her cheeks. I gently asked about her sadness. She told me that a close relative had died. But then she added, “That’s not what is making me so sad. I didn’t like her. I never prayed for her.”

What can we say?

I said, “It’s painful—we can’t undo the past.”

But there is more to say, isn’t there?

Thank God, we can also say what I pointed out next to my

friend: “God is very good at forgiving our past.”

And together we claimed the truth: “If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” That’s the good news of God’s love for us. He forgives us completely and gives us a new life to live.

My friend needed this good news. I need it. We all need it.

And thank God—it is truly good news. He forgives us our sins and purifies us from *all* unrighteousness.

We need your forgiveness, Lord. Please forgive us and purify us from whatever our unrighteousness may be. Thank you, Jesus, for forgiving us. In your name, Amen.

FAITH—RESPONDING TO CURSING

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”

—Luke 6:27-28

I received a phone message that caught me by surprise. It was a blistering, angry, cursing message that burned my ears and bruised my heart. Hell would be too good for me, the voice said.

I had been asked to conduct the funeral of a man I didn't know. In a meeting with the family, I learned things that were helpful to know as I prepared for the funeral service. But what I said in that service had angered the man's son. So he had called and left that message. With a tongue loosened by liquor, he let me know just how angry he was.

How should I respond? As I absorbed his anger, I prayed for grace and wisdom. I sent him a letter in which I acknowledged that it was my task to communicate clearly, but that I must have said some-

thing that caused him offense. I offered to meet him at his convenience.

I never heard from him again. But I thought of him often with pained heaviness. Every time I felt upset or troubled by this matter, I heard Jesus' words in our text for today: respond with love, bless those who curse you, pray for them. With hurting but loving concern, I placed this situation in the hands of our gracious and loving God. The peace I feel as a result, though not untroubled, is real. Thank you, Jesus.

Thank you, Lord, for your gracious ways in our lives. Give us the grace to pray for people who curse us, and to love those who hate. In Jesus, Amen.

FAITH—MAKING PEACE

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.”
—Matthew 5:9

Julia Jackson can rightly be called a child of God. Her son, a young African American, had been shot by police and lay paralyzed in a Kenosha, Wisconsin, hospital. I saw this deeply hurt mother approach a large bank of microphones, pause to collect herself, and then begin to address a city and nation that had exploded into destructive rioting and looting. What would she say?

She drew a deep breath and began to speak, “As I was riding through here, the city, I noticed a lot of damage. It doesn’t reflect my son or my family. If Jacob knew what was going on as far as that goes—the violence and the destruction—he would be very displeased. So I’m really asking and encouraging everyone in Wisconsin and abroad to take a moment and examine your heart.”

I was stunned into silence. From the depths of her heart this hurting mother told us she was praying for the city. “We really just need prayers,” she said. And then, with grace and dignity, she continued, “To you police officers and your families, I am praying for you. To you brown and black sisters and brothers, I am praying for you.”

“We need healing,” she said. Indeed we do. And God used her, this peacemaker, to move us toward healing. “Blessed are the peacemakers,” Jesus said. They are children of God. Let us thank God for Julia Jackson, a faithful, peacemaking child of God. I want to be her brother—and a peacemaker too.

Lord, help us to be peacemakers in this world today. Amen.

FAITH—CONFESSING JESUS IS LORD!

Every tongue [shall] acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.
—Philippians 2:11

Our pastor talked about feeling the weight of ministering in our time. Political issues, social unrest, justice concerns, COVID-19, congregational needs—all these and more had become heavy to the point of being overwhelming. She spoke as a pastor, but it isn't only pastors and church leaders who know the struggle with matters that are too big for us, is it?

In a sermon, she told us about the powerful impact of a three-word sentence that a church leader used at the end of his emails. Before he “signed” his name, he would write, “Jesus is Lord!”

Our pastor experienced power and encouragement from this simple little sentence. Why?

Because Jesus the Lord is the one who loves us—so much that he willingly became a ser-

vant, surrendering the glory of equality with God. And more—“he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross” for our sake!

And even more—Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to rule in heaven. He is the risen, exalted, reigning Christ—the Lord to whom all authority and power in heaven and on earth have been given.

He is our risen, living, ascended, reigning Lord. And “if you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9).

Thank you, Jesus, for being the Savior and Lord we need—powerful and strong, gentle and loving. Amen.

FAITH—SEEING THAT GOD IS GOOD

Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.
—Psalm 34:8

With the aid of her walker, a woman at the nursing home was out enjoying a brief stroll on a pleasant summer evening. I admired her courage in being out there, but what she said was even more admirable. With all her heart she said, “God is so good! God is so good!”

Decades earlier, at age 40, she had suffered a major stroke. In a moment, the mother of three active youngsters went from a demanding, busy life to a bed in the hospital’s stroke unit. Half of her body was paralyzed. Acute hospital care transitioned to months of demanding rehabilitation before she returned to her young family—and then with only a fraction of her former strength.

And now, four decades later, what does she say? “God is so good!”

How could she say this? Well, she was not happy to have had the stroke. Like all of us, she longed to be healthy and strong all her years. But in and through all that she experienced—weakness, demanding therapy, struggles, disappointments—she tasted and saw what the psalmist had discovered: that the Lord is good. Over the decades, whatever the experiences, she saw and savored the Lord’s goodness. Because she trusted wholeheartedly in God, her Savior, she knew blessedness—the blessedness of all who take refuge in him.

She convinced me anew: God is so good!

Lord, whatever our situation may be, help us to taste and see your goodness. We take refuge in you. Amen.

FAITH—PRACTICING GOODNESS

Always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.
—1 Thessalonians 5:15

Briefcase in hand, I hustled toward the door of the office building. In the wind and cold I fumbled for my keys. I had the right key, but it wouldn't open the door. I set my briefcase down and tried a little more intently. But the door, not the one I usually used to enter the building, would not open. I turned around, deciding I would have to go around the building to another door. But then a gentleman inside came tapping on the window and gesturing for me to come in. With a warm, welcoming smile, he opened the door for me.

It was a small thing, the kind of thing that can happen often. But it warmed my heart and the rest of me as I entered the building.

He didn't have to do it. I could have gotten in by another door, but he blessed me with his good kindness. I remember

it still. That gracious act was like a lubricant that made life flow more smoothly.

All of us have been on the receiving end of such acts. The shape of these acts varies: smiling kindly to a harried cashier, speaking a word of encouragement when a tear brims in the eye, sending a note of concern at the right time, pausing to listen to a hurting neighbor. You weren't paid to do it. Perhaps no one else noticed it. You may even have forgotten the deed, but the world is a better place because you did it!

Love is seen in the good and kind care we show to others—and our faith is seen too.

Lord, help us today to "do what is good for each other and for everyone else." Amen.

FAITH—LOVING DEEPLY

Above all, love each other deeply. . . . Offer hospitality to one another. . . .
—1 Peter 4:8-9

In our church there was a small woman who had a big presence—gentle, generous, hospitable, loving. Anyone who met her experienced her loving hospitality. A friend of mine met her while visiting for worship with us one Sunday, and the friend aptly observed, “That woman—she’s a jewel. You ought to clone her.”

We all loved that dear woman. And that was because she loved us—so unassumingly, so generously, so gladly, and so very well.

That love reached neighborhood children, brought meals to families at just the right time, sweetened committee meetings with delicious baked goods. She prayed for us too.

Even when dementia had taken a lot from her and she wanted me to pray for her, she would also take my hand and

pray for me. At that point her sentences didn’t flow smoothly, but her prayers were moving, loving.

Where does such love and hospitality come from? She loved well because she was loved. She knew the deep and wide and never-ending love of God. She experienced his Son-sacrificing, sin-forgiving, cross-bearing, death-defeating love in her faithful Savior. And out of that love she loved us!

We can’t clone her, but we can learn from her. We can follow her example—and by God’s grace we can also be the hands and feet and voice and heart of Jesus—loving others with the deep, deep love of the Lord.

Thank you, Lord, for your deep, deep love for us. Out of your love, help us to love each other deeply. Amen.

FAITH—WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth. . . .”

—Matthew 6:19

It was a beauty—the cherry-red car I saw in the showroom. It grabbed too much of my heart—and too much of my savings account. Soon after I bought it, my son and I took it on a trip to the Rocky Mountains. Our first day’s destination was the home of friends in Wisconsin.

It was a delight to be together as a dad and son on that journey. We were glad to be greeted by our friends in Wisconsin—until we heard an unsettling crunch of metal on metal. Oh, oh—what happened?!

We went out to look. It wasn’t good. Our friends’ young driver had backed their “beast” into the left front of our brand-new car, which wasn’t so beautiful anymore. We stood there in shock, shaking our heads in dismay.

Then my son said, “Well, Dad, it has happened. Now the important thing is how we respond.” I felt like saying, “Easy for you to say; it’s my car!” But my better self came to see the wisdom of his words.

What treasure was my heart set on? On a car, now marred with ugly damage? When the unwanted happens—an accident, illness, death, whatever—the important thing is how we respond. Paul’s words in Romans 8:28 remind me to look to God and to know that he will work things out to bring good.

Lord, guide us to seek you and your kingdom first. When bad things happen, hold our hearts and help us to know that in all things you work to bring good. Amen.

FAITH—WHEN NOTHING GETS EASIER

I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.
—Philippians 4:12

As I drove up to the assisted living facility, my friend was ready and waiting. It was Tuesday, our breakfast day. With some effort he pulled his aged legs into the car, placed the cane between us, and let me fasten his seat belt. Then, buckled in, he sighed quietly, “Nothing gets easier.”

My quiet, unassuming friend remembered other days—back when he was a strong, vibrant young man. At our breakfasts we could sometimes coax stories out of him about being a pilot in World War II. Or he might share with us some memories he enjoyed from decades of playing golf. He had lived a healthy, active, productive life.

But now his legs and the body that had served him well for nearly a century had become unsteady and unreliable. Sim-

ple tasks had become challenging. The sigh that came was understandable: “Nothing gets easier.”

His gentle sigh wasn’t a protest; it wasn’t a grumbling complaint. My friend was simply stating a fact. What countless generations have experienced was now *his* lot; he accepted it—with grace and gentleness and a trusting contentment. My friend had learned what the apostle Paul learned—to be content in every situation.

Nothing gets easier. But by an interesting twist of God’s grace, we can grow spiritual fruit: patience, kindness, gentleness, contentment.

Lord, grant us contentment as we live out our lives. Thank you. Amen.

FAITH—HELPING THE FATHERLESS

The victims commit themselves to you; you are the helper of the fatherless.
—Psalm 10:14

This psalm reminds me of an awful night in Jos, Nigeria. Thieves scaled the wall of our mission compound. With machetes, they attacked the guard on duty. By the time help arrived, he was fatally wounded. Mission staff brought him to the hospital, but it was too late. He had lost his life trying to keep us safe.

On that dreadful night, his dear wife became a widow—and his four young children, fatherless. What is there to say in the event of such brutality, such loss?

As a mission community, we met together to process our feelings: guilt, grief, pain, anger. We turned to Psalm 10 as we shared our experience. With the psalmist we cried, “Why, LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” “The wicked” had come into our compound.

From an ambush they had murdered the innocent.

We felt crushed. But we joined with the psalmist in prayer: “You, God, see the trouble of the afflicted; you consider their grief and take it in hand. The victims commit themselves to you; you are the helper of the fatherless.”

How does God take in hand grief and trouble from such a tragedy? His Father-heart hurts with the grieving. He shows care through his people—grieving with the family, paying funeral costs, providing scholarship funds for the children. In their help a hurting family saw that God is the helper of the fatherless.

Work in us and through us, Lord, to show your care for people who are hurting. Amen.

FAITH—THROUGH THE VALLEY

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.*
—Psalm 23:4

As I visited an elderly pastor near the end of his life, he maintained his warm sense of humor, but his situation wasn't humorous. The experienced church leader acknowledged what the apostle Paul had said: "The time for my departure is near" (2 Timothy 4:6). He had lost the strength and vigor of his youth, but his years and experience had brought a wisdom that made being with him a treat.

As his chaplain, I had many contacts with this seasoned pastor. Mostly I listened, happy to be his student even in ministering to him. On this visit our discussion moved, not surprisingly, to Psalm 23.

As we zeroed in on verse 4, he questioned me: "Do you know what the most important word in that text is?" And I said, "You tell me—what is it?"

His answer was "The word *through*." Then he explained: "It doesn't say that we go into the valley, but that we go *through* the valley. The Lord, our shepherd, leads us through the valley. He gets us to the other side, where we 'will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.'"

A beautiful, comforting pastoral word. Our resurrected Lord knows the way through the valley of the shadow of death, and because he is with us, we need not fear. Receive it; believe it: Jesus, our Shepherd, leads us *through* the valley.

Thank you, Good Shepherd, for leading us through the valley, all the way home. Amen.

FAITH—HE'S MY FRIEND

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

For eight months a resident of the nursing home was in hospice care—far longer than she was expected to last. Her family felt the uneasy tension of praying that the end they didn't want to come would come soon.

It was my privilege to visit her often. She wouldn't always notice that I had come into the room, but as I sat with her and gently touched her arm, she would open her eyes, and her face would take on a knowing look.

She was very weak, and when she spoke, it was a feeble whisper. I knew she had been a singer, so I asked if she had a favorite song. It took some patient listening, but I was rewarded by a thin voice rasping, "Jesus Is All the World to Me." I tentatively began to sing along. She led me through the whole first stanza:

"Jesus is all the world to me,/ my life, my joy, my all;/ he is my strength from day to day,/ without him I would fall./ When I am sad, to him I go,/ no other one can cheer me so;/ when I am sad, he makes me glad;/ he's my Friend."

As I left her room, grateful tears filled my eyes. My heart said, "That's the way to be nearing death—knowing, having such a friend."

Jesus, her friend, loved her—enough to lay down his life for her! Her loving response? "I know this: I love my dear friend, Jesus."

Do you know this too?

Thank you, Jesus, for being the friend who is all the world to us. We love you. Amen.

FAITH—SEEING GRATEFULLY

Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.
—1 Thessalonians 5:18

A friend's cancer had returned. I went to see him in his home. It was a comfortable place, but he couldn't hide his discomfort. The cancer was now in his bones. He was hurting—badly.

His most comfortable position, he learned, was to lie with his back flat on the floor. So that's what he often did.

He shared his experience of watching the news from that position. "I saw the masses on the hillside—thousands of refugees from Iraq crowded into camps. Snow, bitterly cold weather, and their only shelter was wholly inadequate tents!" he said.

I admired him for his empathy. He reflected further: "Some of those people are sick and in pain too—and look where they are, lying in a tent in that bitter cold!"

As he saw those distant neighbors, he was moved by compassionate concern for them, and he was grateful for his own surroundings. "I am in pain, but I am so blessed to have this good place to lie down. I am very thankful."

Even in his severe pain, my friend saw blessings and gave thanks! He showed me what it can mean to "give thanks in all circumstances."

As I left his home that day, my heart was warm and grateful—for this gracious brother and his grateful heart. I want that gratefulness in my heart.

Lord, give us grateful hearts. Whatever our circumstances are today, give us the grace to see our blessings and to live gratefully. In the loving name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

FAITH—OWNING OUR REALITY

He remembers that we are dust.

—Psalm 103:14

An elderly friend entered the open door of my office, sat down across from my desk, and came right to the point: “Harvey, you must remember you are dust!”

I wasn’t expecting this from her. But I knew from a reliable source that this is true. She was echoing Psalm 103:14: the Lord “remembers that we are dust.”

There was a time when I thought this verse meant that we have little or no worth. I remembered “dust devils” under my bed. Not much value there. We vigorously shook out the dust mop, glad to be rid of the dust.

But my friend was not telling me I was worthless. She was concerned that I was too busy and not taking care of myself properly. Our text says that too, doesn’t it? The Lord

is caring. God is like a father who has compassion on his children. He knows our frailty; he knows how we are formed. The God who took dust and breathed into it the gift of life reminds us that he is willing and able to meet our needs out of the riches of grace in his Son, our Savior.

My elderly friend was blunt, but she was very caring and loving. And she was right. I needed her visit and the reminder that I am dust. It’s my reality. The Lord compassionately remembers it, and I’m trying to remember it too, with thanks!

Thank you, Lord, for making us in your image. Remember us in our needs and refashion us in your likeness through Christ. In his strong name we pray. Amen.

FAITH—CLAIMING WONDERFUL GRACE

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”
—2 Corinthians 12:9

A friend of ours was a gifted speaker with a bottomless well of humor. Quick-witted and fluent with words, he loved to speak. We loved to listen. It was delightful to know him.

But a stroke struck. He was left with only traces of the gifts he had known. Rehabilitation was long and arduous and limited in its results.

I visited this friend regularly. He eventually learned to speak again, but he had to force his words out. So his speech was loud—and delightful. It was full of grace. He didn't like his losses, but he accepted his new reality with remarkable grace.

Every time I visited him, he would say, “The grace of God—wonderful though!” Why “wonderful *though?*” In spite of severe losses and crippling limitations, he knew he was blessed. God was gracious

with him, caring for and loving him deeply. He accepted God's grace, embracing it warmly. His life showed it. He bore the fruit of patience, kindness, goodness, love—even joy!

In him I saw the paradoxical truth that Paul discovered: “I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. . . . For when I am weak, then I am strong.” Yes, our friend was now very weak, but in him I saw the power of Christ. In the Lord, he was strong!

The grace of God is indeed wonderful—and sufficient.

Lord, you promise sufficient grace. Thank you for all who show that grace in their lives. Give us the grace to accept your grace. Amen.

FAITH—SEEING BETTER BY FAR

I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far. . . .
—Philippians 1:23

I cautiously entered her room; there the elderly patient lay, quilt tucked up near her chin. Silky white hair haloed her pale face, blending into the white pillow. She opened her eyes. A weak smile of recognition wrinkled her warm face.

As I sat near her bed, she lifted her hand from under the quilt for me to hold as we chatted. It was honest talk. We both knew it: she was nearing her death. I told her that I was sad that she was so weak and frail, that she was going to leave us soon. Through tears I said, "I am going to miss you." Turning her face toward me, she responded weakly but clearly, "I won't miss you, though."

Was that a putdown? No, it was a deep expression of sincere faith. She believed what the apostle Paul wrote in our text for today: "to depart and be with Christ . . . is better

by far." She knew that when death came, she was going to be with the Lord. Her condition would then be far better than the weakness, dependence, sadness, and pain she presently experienced. For her to live was Christ, so for her to die would be gain.

With a warm heart I left her room. I had seen faith. I had seen strength in that very weak and frail child of God.

How good to belong to God, from whose love nothing can separate us! It's true: what awaits us is better—yes, better by far.

Thank you, Lord, for the testimony of this child of yours. Make our faith strong as we live and as we die. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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