

Today

March/April 2021

refresh, refocus, renew

STRUGGLING
AND GROWING
IN FAITH



ALSO: TREES IN SCRIPTURE

Dear Friends:

In this life we all suffer. Some of us suffer much more than others do, but we all suffer in some way, shape, or form. The Bible describes and explores the sufferings of many different people. Some of these people suffer as a result of their own actions. Others suffer because of what people do to them. And sometimes suffering seems random.



During this season of Lent, Pastor Jang Ho Park looks at some of the Bible's stories of suffering. And at the very center of this focus, we note that Jesus suffered *for us*. All of these examples of suffering—especially the suffering of Jesus—can give us comfort in our suffering and can spark our love and faith in Christ for the great gift of salvation.

In April, Pastor Julia Prins Vanderveen focuses on the theme of trees in the Bible. Trees are not only a sign of God's magnificence in creation, but they are also featured in many images and stories about God's amazing work for our salvation. In Genesis, trees are important in the story of the Garden of Eden. And Revelation closes with a vision mentioning the tree of life. At the center of Scripture we also find that Jesus was crucified on a tree for our sins. In these ways and more, references to trees can help us reflect in fresh ways on the story of how God saves us.

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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**“Struggling and
Growing in Faith”
Jang Ho Park**



**“Trees in Scripture”
Julia Prins Vanderveen**

Managing Editor: Jeff Bulthuis
Executive Editor: Kurt Selles

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**ReFrame
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march

Struggling and Growing in Faith

Jang Ho Park

The Bible shows us that many of God's faithful people endured pain and suffering. And Jesus himself endured the ultimate suffering for our sake. He took on himself all the punishment for our sins so that we can be made right with God.

During this season of Lent we often focus on the sufferings of Jesus, who followed God faithfully. We can also gain insights by reflecting on the sufferings of others—and what that might teach us about following God faithfully. As God's Spirit works in our hearts to inspire us through these stories and examples, we too can grow in faith.

Jang Ho Park is a pastor in Tacoma, Washington. He and his wife, Jong Boon, have two sons.

YOUR BROTHER'S BLOOD

"Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground."

—Genesis 4:10

Abel was the first person to be killed in human history, and his brother, Cain, was the first murderer.

How did Cain come to do such a terrible thing? Cain was jealous and angry because God did not look with favor on his offering. But Cain did not give God the best of his fruits of the soil. He simply gave some of them, and that dishonored God. God explained to Cain that he simply needed to do what was right, but Cain refused to listen. He did not control his anger or his jealousy, and he killed his brother.

Though anger can be one of our innate character traits, we must rule over it. We can be angry, but it is a sin not to manage our anger.

Abel was the victim of Cain's selfishness and wickedness. How undeserving was his

death! How searing was the pain in his heart when his own brother killed him? If we experienced such hatred for serving God through faith, how painful would that be?

God understands our grief from injustice and pain. The Lord said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground." God acknowledged Abel's grief and stood up for him.

We must walk the path of faith, as Abel did. God will guide our footsteps, acknowledge our pain, and follow up with justice.

God, you understand our hearts and our griefs. Please help us serve you and do what is right, caring for others and not hurting them. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

MAKE A NAME FOR OURSELVES

"Let us . . . make a name for ourselves . . . [and not] be scattered over the face of the whole earth."
—Genesis 11:4

God created people so that they would increase in numbers and populate the earth. At the time of the tower of Babel, everyone had the same language, and the people said they wanted to make a name for themselves and not be scattered across the earth. But God ultimately scattered them.

Why did they build a tower? They said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens. . . ." From ancient civilizations we have learned that the top of a tower was seen as a holy place where gods lived. But instead of having a holy place that would honor God, the people at Babel wanted this to be a place where they made a name for themselves. They wanted to honor themselves instead of God. In doing so, they banished God from their lives and disobeyed his

command to "fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28). Because of this rebellion, God confused their language and scattered them.

Imagine how God felt as he confused the people's language. They couldn't understand each other. They couldn't work together anymore. They stopped building, and they moved away from each other.

In the end, people who drive out God cannot do well. They cannot understand each other, and they cannot work together to build a community that honors God.

O God, be the Lord and King of our hearts. Let us be concerned about honoring your name, not ours. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

A BURNT OFFERING

"Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."
—Genesis 22:2

God tells Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son. Why would God ask such a thing?

If I were Abraham, I would have searched for excuses to not sacrifice my son: God, doesn't this go against your promise? Shouldn't you also ask my wife about her thoughts? If I'm asked to sacrifice our son, I can't ignore her opinions, can I? And what would happen if I told my neighbors that I sacrificed my son when they asked me, "Where is your son? I haven't seen him in a while"? Is it even right to sacrifice a person in the first place?

I could come up with lots of questions and excuses. But Abraham obeyed God's words. Imagine the pain in Abraham's heart, as a father who dearly loved his son, as he took Isaac away to Moriah.

And when Abraham obeyed God by acting in faith, what did God do? God showed him a ram that could be sacrificed in place of Isaac. Many years later, God also prepared another sacrifice, his own beloved Son, Jesus, who died in our place. As the Savior of the world, Jesus gave up his own life to pay the price of our sin and to give us eternal life.

God is the thoughtful God who looks and prepares ahead for our future. What a blessing it is to believe in God!

Loving God, give us the faith to obey you in all situations. Help us to obey as Abraham did when you tested him and blessed him. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

STRUGGLES THAT LEAD TO BLESSING

"Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns. . . ."
—Genesis 37:20

Joseph's brothers hated him because their father "loved Joseph more than any of his other sons." Joseph had also had dreams in which his brothers bowed down to him, and he had told them about those dreams (see Genesis 37:1-11).

The brothers hated Joseph so much that they wanted to kill him. One day the opportunity came, as Joseph went out to the fields where his brothers were grazing their flocks. The brothers seized Joseph and threw him into a pit.

Instead of killing him, Joseph's brothers sold him as a slave to some traveling merchants, who took him to Egypt. Imagine Joseph as a slave being dragged around at the market. Imagine the hardship he endured as a slave in Egypt. What kinds of pain would have filled his heart?

Looking at the rest of Joseph's life, we can see that "the Lord was with him" and "gave him success in everything he did" (Genesis 39:3, 23; chap. 40-50). Through that path of hardship Joseph eventually became second in command over Egypt. God used Joseph to save people from a terrible famine, including his whole family and people from all the surrounding nations.

Jesus came to suffer and die for our sake, and through that path of many hardships he rose in victory over death and ascended to heaven, where he now rules over all the earth. His path through suffering has led to blessings for us all!

Lord, when we face sufferings, help us to focus on the blessings we have in Jesus, and to persevere. In his name we pray. Amen.

PUT ME TO DEATH

"I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me."
—Numbers 11:14

As God led his people Israel through the desert to the land he had promised them, the journey was long and hard. But the Lord always provided for them. Even so, the Israelites often complained about their hardships, saying they had it better in Egypt—even though they had been slaves there.

When God disciplined the Israelites because of their rebellion, Moses' heart was troubled. He cried out to God, "Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? . . . Please go ahead and kill me—if I have found favor in your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin."

Did Moses make sense? Like Elijah many years later (1 Kings 19:1-5), Moses was praying with a broken heart. He was overburdened by trying to lead a difficult, complaining people through the wilderness.

Imagine the pain in his heart that prompted such a prayer. It wasn't that Moses didn't have faith to pray. He was expressing his extremely broken heart to God. Imagine also the pain in God's heart because of the people's complaints and rebellion.

God heard Moses' prayer and appointed 70 elders to help with the burden of leading the people. God also sent quail so that the people could eat meat. What a miracle that was!

God's power is boundless, and God listens to the prayers of leaders who care for his people.

Father God, let us not indulge in greed or complaining. Help us to be satisfied and to live in gratitude for all that you have given us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

MOSES' HUMILITY

Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses. . . .

—Numbers 12:1

Miriam and Aaron criticized Moses. Why did they do that? They criticized their brother because Moses' wife was not an Israelite. Moses had grown up in the king's palace in Egypt, but he had run away and lived in Midian for many years before God called him to lead his people out of Egypt. And in Midian, Moses had married the daughter of a sheep herder who had taken him into his household (see Exodus 2-3).

But there was more. Aaron and Miriam seemed to be jealous that God had chosen Moses to be the main speaker of God's will and his law to the people.

What a searing pain Moses must have had in his heart when his family members criticized him. That must have been heartbreaking. But Moses did not speak out. He remained humble, despite the

accusations. And God dealt with the matter.

There may come a time when we are criticized and treated unfairly. What should we do then? We should look to God, persevere, and know that God will take care of things. God will deal justly with people who do wrong. God will make things right.

Just as Moses prayed for people who had done wrong, just as Jesus prayed for those who crucified him, we too can pray for people who mistreat us.

Loving God, even when our friends and family members mistreat us or even persecute us, help us to persevere and wait for you to set things right. In Jesus' name, Amen.

SAMSON'S TRAGEDY

The Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes and . . . binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding in the prison.

—Judges 16:21

By God's grace, Samson was called to an important role. He was to take the lead in delivering God's people from their enemies, the Philistines—and for this task he received a special blessing of strength. Samson was so strong that he tore a lion apart with his bare hands, carried a city gate on his shoulders, and killed a thousand men with the jawbone of a donkey (see Judges 13-15).

But Samson was also foolish in his actions. He disobeyed God's call in many ways. Eventually he fell in love with a Philistine prostitute, Delilah, who secretly worked for his enemies. God took Samson's strength away, and Delilah managed to get him captured (Judges 16:1-21).

Samson paid a miserable price for his wrongdoings. The Philistines gouged out his eyes and

made him grind grain like an ox. For a major assembly at their temple, they brought him out for entertainment. Then Samson prayed, "Please, God, strengthen me just once more." And God strengthened him to break the pillars of the temple and bring it crashing down on the Philistines.

If any of us have turned away from God, there is still hope. We can ask for forgiveness through Jesus Christ, who died to pay for our sins, and God will deliver us from our miseries and lead us to live a new life.

Father, forgive us for the foolish decisions we have made, and guide us to experience the restoration of your grace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

HANNAH'S MISERY

In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly.
—1 Samuel 1:10

Hannah had deep anguish in her heart. Why did Hannah suffer like this? First, she was unable to bear a child. Second, her husband's other wife harassed her. Because of her distress, Hannah went to the house of the Lord to pray.

The Bible tells us of several women who faced difficulties because they could not conceive a child. Hannah stands out because she promised, in faith, that if God gave her a son, she would dedicate him to serve in the Lord's house "all the days of his life."

God gave Hannah a son, Samuel, in answer to her prayer. And Samuel became a servant of God who was set apart.

Even as a young boy, Samuel heard God's call to speak for him at a time when the Israelites no longer heard

from God. Samuel became a prophet of God and led the people faithfully. God guided Samuel in answer to his mother's prayer.

The world is constantly facing many difficulties. In times of distress and anguish, we need to think about God's care and providence, and we need to submit to serving God faithfully. When Hannah sought God and prayed in faith, she was blessed with a child, and God's people were blessed with a faithful leader. When we pray, God provides.

Father God, hear our prayers. Lord, comfort and guide us to serve you in faith, and may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

GOD REJECTS SAUL AS KING

Samuel replied . . . "Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king." —1 Samuel 15:22-23

The people of Israel suffered while Saul was their leader. Saul did not obey God's commands. Saul also set up a monument to honor himself for his victory in a war, raising himself above God.

When Samuel asked Saul, "Why did you not obey the Lord?" Saul lied, saying that everything he did was for God. Of course, Samuel already knew what Saul had done, and this was an opportunity to repent.

But Saul's answer was ridiculous. He tried to cover up his greed with religious excuses. Saul claimed that he had saved out the best sheep and cattle in order to sacrifice them to God. But that was a lie. He also shifted blame to others, saying it was the soldiers who had saved out the best sheep and cattle.

So Samuel said, "Enough!" And he told Saul that because he had rejected the word of the Lord, God had now rejected him as king over Israel.

How about us today? Do we live our lives as we please? Do we lift ourselves up and ignore God's words? Do we make up religious excuses when we have done wrong? Do we blame others for our wrongdoing?

If we do these things, we need to repent and appeal to God for his mercy and grace. We do not want to face the suffering of being rejected by God.

Father God, give us the faith to honestly confess our sins. In your mercy and grace, Lord, restore us to live faithfully for you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

DAVID'S HARDSHIPS AND PRAYERS

Day after day Saul searched for him, but God did not give David into his hands.
—1 Samuel 23:14

After God rejected Saul as the king over Israel because of his disobedience (March 9), God had Samuel anoint David to be the next king (1 Samuel 16). Even so, Saul remained king for a number of years, and he grew jealous of David. Saul even mounted a campaign to kill David, searching for him with his army in the wilderness.

But God protected David and guided him to rely on God in faith. Through this time of struggle David grew to understand that God is the faithful one, and that we can trust God to keep his promises.

For example, David prayed, "The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer. . . . I called to the LORD, who is worthy of praise, and I have been saved from my enemies" (Psalm 18:3). David knew that God was keeping him safe and guiding him. And God gave

David the faith to deal with his hardships.

David prayed and praised God through his painful moments, when he fell short, when he was humbled, and when he wandered miserably. And by God's grace and in God's strength, David survived and was able to flourish.

When we are weary and face difficult times, we too can trust in God and triumph in his power. So let's make sure we stay connected to God through prayer and in praising God's holy and powerful name.

Father God, let us not forget that we are your children, no matter what situations we face. May we praise you and always look to you for guidance, through faith and in your strength. Amen.

PAINFUL CONSEQUENCES

"Come! We must flee, or none of us will escape from Absalom. We must leave immediately, or he will move quickly to overtake us and bring ruin on us. . . ."
—2 Samuel 15:14

After David had been king for many years, one of his sons, Absalom, tried to take over. Absalom declared himself king and built up a following.

David had committed some terrible sins while he was king. For example, he took another man's wife, Bathsheba, and had her husband killed. And although God forgave David when he repented, not everyone forgot what David had done (2 Samuel 11-12).

David had also been a terrible father. Because he had several wives, some of his children were half-brothers and half-sisters. One day David's son Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar, the full sister of Absalom. David was furious but did nothing about it. Then, awhile later, Absalom killed Amnon and ran away (2 Samuel 13).

Now Absalom was staging a coup—and one of David's trusted advisers, Ahithophel, had joined Absalom. Why? It seems that Ahithophel may have been Bathsheba's grandfather (see 2 Samuel 11:3; 23:34). If that was the case, could Ahithophel easily forget what David had done to his granddaughter?

David learned many lessons from the deeds he had done. The consequences of wrongdoing can be painful, on all sides. But instead of making things worse, we can turn to God and ask for forgiveness, and we can work to forgive as the Lord forgives us.

Lord and God, forgive us our many sins. Help us to do right and to forgive others, just as you have forgiven us. In Jesus, Amen.

CURSING AND THROWING STONES

As he cursed, Shimei said, "Get out, get out, you murderer, you scoundrel!"
—2 Samuel 16:7

Some people made King David and his loyal followers suffer a lot.

This story takes place while David is fleeing because his son Absalom is trying to take over the throne. As David and his officials leave Jerusalem and approach another town, a relative of the former king, Saul, comes out and curses David, saying, "Get out, get out, you murderer, you scoundrel!" And he pelts David and his officials with stones.

One of David's military leaders complains about this humiliation. But David says, "If he is cursing because the LORD said to him, 'Curse David,' who can ask, 'Why do you do this?' . . . My son, my own flesh and blood, is trying to kill me. How much more, then, this Benjamite! Leave him alone; let him curse, for the LORD has told him to. It may be that the

Lord will look upon my misery and restore to me his covenant blessing instead of his curse today."

David admitted that all this trouble, from Absalom's treason to Shimei's cursing, could be God's punishment on him for his wrongdoings. David understood he had done many things wrong. And in his repentance, he trusted God to forgive him and care for him.

We can do the same. We may have to face consequences for our actions, but God will also refresh us with his forgiveness and care.

Lord, guide us with your wisdom to be like salt and light in this world. We are far from perfect, but help us to point others to you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

PRAY AND WORK, DESPITE OPPOSITION

When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews. . . .

—Nehemiah 4:1

After a long period of exile and destruction from conquering armies, God's people were allowed to rebuild the temple of the Lord and the city of Jerusalem (see 2 Chronicles 36). Nehemiah led the people in rebuilding the wall, but they faced a lot of opposition from their neighbors in Samaria.

Sanballat and other local leaders opposed Nehemiah and the people of Judah (now also called the Jews), ridiculing and scoffing at them. They threatened to fight and stir up trouble to prevent the Jews from rebuilding.

In the midst of all this, Nehemiah and the people prayed to God for help and "posted a guard day and night to meet this threat." The people were vigilant and worked hard together, and they finished the wall in just 52 days (Nehemiah 6:15)!

We can learn from this example. We can pray, "O God, please protect us from threats and dangers, and give us strength for our work each day. Help us to serve you in all that we do." And before we go to bed at night, it's also important to lock our doors.

We always need God's help and protection. Our "enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). So we pray and work, depending on God every day.

Father God, we need your help and guidance and protection each day. When we face threats and opposition, help us to trust in you and to serve you faithfully. In Jesus' name, Amen.

GREAT MOURNING

There was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes. —Esther 4:3

Haman, a malicious adviser to the king of Persia, had come up with a plan to destroy the Jews (Esther 3). When Mordecai heard about this, he was in great distress. All of his people were in danger.

Mordecai spread the word, urging all of the Jews throughout the kingdom to fast and mourn. This meant praying to God for help and avoiding food and drink, except for water, for a number of days. Mordecai also did everything he could to let the world know what would happen to his people.

We can learn an important lesson here. When we face a crisis, we must pray to God for help and wisdom and protection. Then we need to do what we can, but our efforts should not go ahead of praying to God.

In Psalm 124 we find a song of King David that says, “If the

LORD had not been on our side when people attacked us, they would have swallowed us alive. . . . Our help is in the name of the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.” David confessed that victory came because God was with him.

Mordecai and the Jews also received God’s help. Prayer is important every day in our life with God. God works in and through his people in many ways against the destructive powers of this world. We can work with God as people of faith through prayer and obedience.

Father God, the world and its nations are in your hands. We pray that you will kindly reign over all people and leaders to do your work in your world. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

ESTHER'S URGENT REQUEST

Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty . . . grant me my life . . . and spare my people. . . ."

—Esther 7:3

Haman had planned to destroy the Jews (March 14). He had also set a day for the killing to take place (Esther 3:13). But God did not allow Haman's scheme to unfold. Hearing the prayers of Mordecai, the people of Judah, and Queen Esther, God judged Haman.

When she heard the news about Haman's plot, Queen Esther resolved to approach the king for his favor and mercy, even if it meant that she might die if he refused her (Esther 4:15-5:4).

And at a banquet she prepared, she said, "If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request." The king now realized how vicious Haman's plot was, and he agreed with Esther's request.

God brought Haman's evil scheme down on his own head. As Psalm 7:15-16 puts it, "Whoever digs a hole and scoops it out falls into the pit they have made. The trouble they cause recoils on them; their violence comes down on their own heads." Haman was impaled to death on a pole that he had made for Mordecai.

People reap what they sow. Let us ask God to help us do good, and not evil, in all that we think, do, and say.

God, you see everything we do, and you know our hearts. Forgive us our sins, and help us to do good, showing love to our neighbors each day. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

MY SOUL THIRSTS FOR GOD

My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" —Psalm 42:3

The author of Psalm 42 is in deep distress. He is longing for God, and people around him have been taunting him, saying, "Where is your God?"

People in this world also taunt and judge us sometimes. But we should not let that bother us, because people judge others by their own standards. God's standards are more important.

The psalmist also didn't see any sign of help and could not go to worship God in the sanctuary—and that caused him to feel forgotten by God. It made the psalmist ache inside. If we are not able to worship God with his people, we too can feel lonely and hurt inside.

The poet longed to be with God and to meet with God. "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God."

This psalm helps us to see that we can keep faith despite the stresses of feeling distant from God. In God's strength, the psalmist keeps talking to his soul, saying, "Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God" (42:5, 10; see also Psalm 43:5).

It may take awhile to feel close to God again, especially if we cannot worship God with his people. But God is always with us, watching over us. Our souls are in his hands. Our destiny is safe in his care. Like the psalmist, we can keep reminding ourselves of these good truths in faith. We can praise the Lord, for he is our Savior and God.

Loving God, you know our suffering. Bring us near to you. Be with us always, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

JEREMIAH'S SUFFERING

*[Pashhur] had Jeremiah the prophet beaten and put in the stocks
... at the LORD's temple.*
—Jeremiah 20:2

Pashhur was a priest who was in charge of the temple of God in Jerusalem. But he was corrupt. He had the prophet Jeremiah beaten and put in stocks. Jeremiah told the truth about God and urged the people to turn back to God and repent from wrongdoing, but Pashhur and others would not listen. Instead, he preferred to listen to prophets who told lies and went along with people who disobeyed God.

So Jeremiah said that, later, when God would punish Judah for their corruption and unfaithfulness, Pashhur would be taken away in exile to Babylon. Pashhur and all his household would die there and never return to Judah and Jerusalem.

What can we learn from this? First, we can learn that God is serious about obedience. God calls us to live for him and to follow his ways, not the selfish,

greedy, and corrupt ways of the world. We can also learn that we should respect people who speak the truth of God.

Jeremiah had a very difficult calling from God—to preach to a rebellious people and urge them to turn back to God and repent of their stubborn, corrupt ways. “I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me,” Jeremiah complained (20:7). But he could not stop preaching God’s words, no matter how difficult it was for him.

Let us listen to God’s servants who speak the truth. Let us examine our hearts and seek to live faithfully for God.

Holy God, have mercy on us. Give us the faith to serve you and to stand up against corruption, wherever it is. In Jesus, Amen.

THE FIERY FURNACE

... And these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.
—Daniel 3:23

King Nebuchadnezzar had made an image of gold and had ordered people to bow down and worship it (Daniel 3:1-6). But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to do that, because they did not worship idols or other gods. They worshiped only the true God. So the king's astrologers spoke against these men and said they should be thrown into a blazing furnace.

Let's look at Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's reply: "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

They said they would not worship the image of gold for any reason, even if God did not

deliver them. They were determined to obey God, and they trusted in God to protect their souls even if the fire killed them and burned them up. Many people expect "realistic compensation" for their actions, but Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego declared that they would obey God, no matter what happened.

What incredible faith! And God protected them from the fire when they refused to compromise their faith.

Almighty God, let us live by faith and not follow the powers of this world, even if they demand our loyalty. Help us to trust that you will deliver us always, whether in this life or the next. In Jesus, Amen.

THE LIONS' DEN

The king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions' den.
—Daniel 6:16

Daniel was a faithful follower of the Lord, even though he lived in exile in Babylon. And he had been appointed as one of the king's top administrators. The other administrators were jealous of Daniel, however, and they wanted to destroy him. So they tricked the king into making a decree that said anyone who prayed to any god except the king should be thrown into a den of hungry lions (Daniel 6:1-9).

What did Daniel do in response to that? He prayed to God, asking for help. Daniel trusted in God because he knew that God is more powerful than any king or decree.

Did Daniel complain to God? Did Daniel claim it was not right to end his life in a lions' den when he had been faithful all his life? No, Daniel did not do things like that. Instead, he praised God and gave thanks

for all of God's blessings, even in this difficult situation. And the next morning, when the king went to check on him, Daniel said, "My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions."

Later, however, when the king had Daniel's enemies thrown into the lions' den for trying to destroy Daniel, God punished them. "Before they reached the floor of the den, the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones."

God is alive and has power over even our worst enemies. Hallelujah!

Almighty God, help us in your strength to overcome whatever trials we may face. Guide us to seek you and to honor you always. In Jesus' name, Amen.

STRANGE COMMAND

The LORD said, "Call him Lo-Ammi (which means not my people), for you are not my people, and I am not your God."

—Hosea 1:9

What a strange command! God told Hosea to marry a promiscuous woman. Why would God tell Hosea to do that? How would that make Hosea feel in his heart? What was happening in God's heart that he would tell Hosea to do this?

God did this to point out that the people of Israel had become unfaithful to him, just as a promiscuous woman would be unfaithful to her husband and family. God's people had been following after the gods of other nations, even though all those gods were false and couldn't do anything for them. Only God could provide for the people and care for them, but they ignored God and became spiritually unfaithful.

What happened to the household of Hosea? His wife, Gomer, ran away from home. She had affairs with other men.

Imagine how this must have hurt Hosea's heart. Then God commanded Hosea to bring his wife back (Hosea 3). If we were in Hosea's place, would we want to bring our spouse back?

Hosea's situation helps us to see how painful it was for God to keep loving his people and caring for them. Even though they kept turning away to their own destruction, God kept loving them—just as he keeps loving us today. Eventually he sent his only Son, Jesus, to pay for all the sins of us fallen sinners and to take us back. What an amazing God of love!

Loving God, we praise you for giving your Son to save us. Help us to understand what it cost you to keep loving us. Thank you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

GOD'S LOVE

"Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods. . . ."
—Hosea 3:1

How embarrassing it must have been for Hosea to deal with his wife's unfaithfulness. But God told Hosea to show love to her, so Hosea paid the price to buy her back and bring her home.

What can we learn from this? We learn that no one can climb out of the depths of sin on their own. In addition, we learn that God's work of salvation pays the price to redeem the sinner (buy them back) and save them.

This is a picture of all that God has done to show his love to us, his people. God made Jesus to be a sacrifice in order to save us. Jesus laid down his life to pay the price to redeem us, so that we can be free from our sin and have new life with God. In this way, God restored us from being slaves of sin to being his people again. He made us a part of his family again, just as Hosea restored

Gomer. What a great blessing this is!

There is a book in Korea called *"From Seo-cho to Heaven."* Seo-cho is a district in the city of Seoul. The point is this: people can live in Seo-cho and can move to other districts in the city, but they can't move to heaven as they please. How do we "move" to heaven? It's possible only if we believe in Jesus.

How should we then live? Well, Hosea tells Gomer not to run away or commit adultery again. So this means we, as God's family, shouldn't turn away and love the world again. We cannot serve two masters.

Dear God, thank you for saving us from the depths of our sin. Help us to live faithfully for you from now on. In Jesus, Amen.

JOHN THE BAPTIST BEHEADED

[King Herod] sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, [and] beheaded John in the prison. . . .

—Mark 6:27

People usually like to hide their secrets.

King Herod and Herodias, for example, were not legally married, because Herodias was still married to Herod's brother. But they didn't want people to know that.

So when John the Baptist pointed out their wrongdoing, Herod arrested John and put him in prison. Herodias, nursing a grudge, wanted to kill John, but Herod was afraid to do that, knowing John was a prophet.

But then an opportunity came when Herodias's daughter danced for King Herod on his birthday. In return, Herod promised to give her whatever she wanted.

So she asked her mother, "What shall I ask for?"

And Herodias said, "The head of John the Baptist."

So Herod, not wanting to be embarrassed in front of his guests, had John beheaded.

Herod was a foolish man who chose to ignore the truth and tried to do whatever he pleased. Could he have been forgiven? Yes, if he wanted to repent and obey God, he could have been forgiven, even for his terrible crimes. But Herod chose to ignore the message of John, about repentance and forgiveness, and John suffered by losing his life at the hands of this wicked king.

How should we live our lives today? If all we want to do is please ourselves, we will only hurt others and the Lord.

Lord God, by your grace,
please forgive us our sins,
and lead us to honor you
with our whole lives.
In Jesus' name we pray.
Amen.

OUR FATHER'S LOVE

"This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." So they began to celebrate. —Luke 15:24

Jesus taught about the kingdom of God with many parables. In this story about a lost son, we learn some important things about God's love.

A man had two sons, and the younger one demanded his share of his father's inheritance. Then, soon after the father had given him his inheritance, the younger son spent all of it foolishly. It was bad enough that he had asked for his inheritance while his father was still alive, but squandering it was also very foolish.

Still, the father's love toward his son continued. And when the son returned, the father welcomed him back with unconditional love.

This parable portrays the depths of the amazing love in God's heart. It shows God's willingness to accept and forgive any of us who come back to him from our wandering.

Now, when the father called for a celebration, the older son complained. He could not understand the father's love and forgiveness. So the father explained to him that it was as if his brother had been dead and was alive again. So he wanted everyone to celebrate with him.

This parable also teaches us, then, that God calls us to celebrate when a wandering sinner comes back and wants to be part of God's family. Will we let them in? Will we forgive as the Lord has forgiven us? This is how the love of God calls us to live.

Lord, thank you for your grace and forgiveness of sins. Help us to turn back to you each day, and also to forgive others. In Jesus' name, Amen.

STEPHEN'S DEATH

*While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."
—Acts 7:59*

Stephen was known "as a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5). He was one of the first leaders chosen in the early church to help with providing food and other needs for others. Stephen is also described as "a man full of God's grace and power," and the religious leaders who opposed the early church "could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke" (Acts 6:8, 10).

Those leaders hated Stephen so much that they had him arrested and put on trial. Then, when he was asked about the charges against him, Stephen gave a long speech about God's faithful work in history through his prophets, even though the people of Israel were often unfaithful. God even sent his Son, Jesus, to be the Righteous One, the Messiah, but these very leaders had murdered him (Acts 7:1-53).

When Stephen said that, the religious leaders became furious, and they dragged him out to stone him to death. But Stephen looked up and saw Jesus in heaven, and he said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he asked, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

Stephen suffered and died for his faith in Jesus. And although he was killed, his example inspired many others to speak out and live for Christ. And by the power and wisdom of the Spirit, the Lord has built his church to reach out and serve people so that it brings the same saving message of God's love to the world today.

Spirit of God, give us your wisdom to speak the truth and live by it, in Jesus' name. Amen.

PERSECUTION OF THE CHURCH

King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them.
—Acts 12:1

James, along with his brother John, were called by Jesus to become his disciples. They had such fiery personalities that Jesus gave them the nickname “sons of thunder” (Mark 3:17; see Luke 9:54). Along with Peter, they became Jesus’ three closest disciples (Mark 9:2; 14:33). And when the church began to grow after Jesus’ death and resurrection, James became the first apostle to be killed for his faith in Christ.

“King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them.” Herod had James killed, probably because James was known as a leader, and when Herod saw that the Jewish authorities approved of this, he arrested Peter also.

This led the church to pray earnestly for Peter. And the Lord surely had more work for Peter to do, because on the night before Peter’s trial, God sent

an angel to break Peter out of prison. Amazing!

Sometimes people have a question about this. Why did God allow James to be killed, but then God sent an angel to save Peter? Was God showing favoritism? No.

God has a plan for each of us in our lives, and he calls us to serve him until he is ready to take us to be with him. And while we continue to live in this world of suffering, God will provide what we need.

Our eternal destiny is safe with God, and nothing can take us out of his hands (John 10:28-30).

Holy God, let us fulfill the calling you have given us to spread the gospel and build up the church, even in the midst of suffering and persecution in this world. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

TROUBLES AND COMFORT

Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.
—2 Corinthians 1:9

The apostle Paul and his missionary companions experienced many hardships in their travels. For example, Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 1, “We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death.” How did Paul pull through such hardships and persecution? He said that God comforted him and gave him power to overcome them.

Everyone needs consolation. When we need consolation, we can rely on God to comfort us and provide what we need.

Even so, God allows us to face difficult troubles in our lives at times. And when that happens, we can look back to the experiences of other believers, like Paul and his companions—and we can be encouraged that

God gave them the comfort and strength to carry through.

We must rely on God, not on our own power. When we realize that God knows our situations and that we totally depend on him, we can trust God with our souls and lives. Our destiny is safe in his hands.

There is working power in prayer. Who works when we pray? God. Notice that Paul doesn’t pray by himself, but that he asks the church to pray too. God comforts us, answers our prayers, and often works miracles when we face hardships. We can trust our faithful, comforting God each day.

Comforting God, guide us to pray each day, walking together in faith and knowing that we are safe in your hands. In Jesus, Amen.

A THORN IN THE FLESH

He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." —2 Corinthians 12:1-10

The apostle Paul was dedicated to God. But Paul had a "thorn in the flesh"—possibly a disease that bothered him quite a lot. He called it "a messenger of Satan, to torment" him. We don't know what it was, but somehow it made Paul weaker than he wanted to be.

Thorns prick, scratch, and wound. However, the point of Paul's example is that because of his thorn in the flesh, God was able to work through him more powerfully.

Although Paul pleaded three times with the Lord to take his thorn away, the Lord responded, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Paul notes that he was given his thorn "in order to keep . . . from becoming conceited." This means Paul knew that if he did not have this thorn,

he could have become proud. So Paul is teaching us that his thorn in the flesh was actually a good thing. It was a sign of God's grace to keep him from becoming a proud leader in the church. And we can surely thank God for that.

This does not mean we should ask God to give us a thorn in the flesh. We can trust that God knows what is best for us. But if God does allow us to have a particular kind of suffering, we can also trust that he can use it to do good. As Paul writes in another place, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

Lord and God, work in us and through us, that your power and goodness in our lives may be clear to others. In Jesus' name, Amen.

FORCED TO CARRY

A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.
—Mark 15:21

Jesus was arrested and brought before the governor, Pilate, on false charges, and he was flogged by Roman soldiers. The soldiers' whips were made of leather strings that had pieces of lead, sharp bones, or nails tied onto them. Each stroke of the whip tore the person's skin and ripped out pieces of flesh. The soldiers also placed a crown of thorns on Jesus' head. All of this left Jesus deathly weak and bleeding, and he could not carry his cross.

Simon, a man from Cyrene in North Africa, "was passing by on his way in from the country," and the Romans forced him to carry Jesus' cross to Golgotha. Simon was probably tired already, since he was traveling in to Jerusalem from the countryside. But he was forced to change course and go back out of the city. And for what? To carry a cross for a man

sentenced to a most horrible death by crucifixion.

Did Jesus talk to Simon or look him in the eye? We don't know, but it seems that Simon's life may have changed after carrying that cross. He is described also as "the father of Alexander and Rufus," mentioned here in a way that suggests these young men were known by the community that first read the book of Mark. Did Simon and his family become followers of Jesus? They surely could have, because many people became believers after Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven. (See also Romans 16:13.)

Do you believe?

Father God, let us serve you by carrying whatever cross you call us to, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

THIRSTY

Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty."

—John 19:28

After hours of suffering on the cross, Jesus said he was thirsty. Imagine the extreme pain he felt with the crown of thorns on his head and the nails through his hands and feet. He would have had terrible cramping, agonizing jolts of pain when he tried to move, and shortness of breath.

Why did Jesus suffer this way? First, he suffered because he had come to save us by dying in our place. Second, he came to fulfill what was written—"so that the Scripture would be fulfilled." (See, for example, Psalm 22:1, 7-8, 14-18.)

A Korean monk lived inside metal fences for 10 years and ate only pine-needle powder and rice flour. It is also said that for eight years he never lay down but slept while sitting.

Many people respected his self-discipline, but on his death-

bed he said: "Since I have deceived so many in my lifetime, my iniquities have filled the sky and overflowed Mount Meru. Now I fall into hell alive, and there are tens of thousands of strands of regret." The monk had learned that he could not atone for his own sins, and, sadly, he did not know Jesus.

Jesus is the only one who can give us eternal life. He came to suffer and die in our place, taking on himself all the punishment for our sins, because only he could bear it. He endured thirst so that we can have living water. By his wounds and suffering we are healed and reconciled with God, who loves us.

What a Savior!

Father, thank you for sending your Son to save us and give us eternal life. In his name we pray. Amen.

JESUS CRIED OUT

About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" (which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").
—Matthew 27:46

When would a person be most disheartened? Many people say that would happen if a parent, spouse, or friend totally forsakes them.

Jesus was forsaken by God and suffered the torments of hell because of our sins. If he didn't pay the price for our sins for us, we could never be in God's presence. Nothing sinful or impure can stand in the presence of God (Malachi 3:1-2; Revelation 6:15-17). So Jesus took our sins upon himself and was forsaken in our place.

Jesus spoke the words of Psalm 22 as he hung dying on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus completed our salvation as he suffered for us on the cross.

Some have doubts, saying, "How could so many people be saved through one man's death?" Well, we must remem-

ber that Jesus himself is God. So the value of Jesus' death cannot be measured by quantity, but by its quality. Jesus, the Lord of lords and King of kings, is more precious than all humankind, so his death could easily pay the price of all human sin. His sacrifice is more than enough to save us. Jesus' precious blood washes away our sins forever.

How excruciating that pain must have been for Jesus when he was forsaken by God! Think upon Jesus' cry and meditate on his sufferings—and give thanks for God's amazing grace!

Dear God, we thank you for giving your one and only Son to die for us, paying the price for all our sins. Guide us to live in gratitude for your amazing love and grace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

FOLLOW JESUS' EXAMPLE

"Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."

—1 Corinthians 11:1

People's mindsets usually determine their actions.

What is your mindset? What motivates you? What do you value in life, and whom do you follow?

Jesus, the Savior, calls us to follow him, and Paul teaches, "Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." And he says, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."

One day, a grade-school teacher asked his students to come up and talk about their ancestors or parents. One child came to the front and said, "My grandfather is a principal, and my dad is the CEO of a company. I'm very proud of them." Another child also came to the front and boasted about his parents in his own way.

Then the teacher remembered that one of the children was an orphan and did not have par-

ents. The teacher became anxious and embarrassed about the fact that he had overlooked that child.

But when the orphan came up to the front, he spoke with great confidence: "My Father is God. My Father has many children. So I have many siblings as well. Also, my Father is the owner of this world. He is wealthier than everyone, and he is more loving too."

We are the children of God. Our Father has given us his Son, so that we can have full life with him forever.

Shall we follow his example and invite others to do the same?

Father God, thank you for loving us so immensely. Lord Jesus, as we struggle in this world, help us to grow in faith and to follow your example. Amen.

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