



CONCORDANCE  
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HOLY

# Justice AND THE PROPHETS

# The Silent Moment

**W**hat does the LORD require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

— Micah 6:8



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## Justice and the Prophets

During Solomon's reign, cultural and religious influences began to erode the spiritual and moral fabric of Israel. After Solomon died the nation divided. In rebellion, the political and religious leaders in the northern kingdom led the people away from God and justice. The southern kingdom initially maintained integrity, but eventually also separated from God and justice, even after some intermittent periods of revival that the people did not sustain.

God showed mercy by calling individuals to become prophets. They knew God, studied the Scriptures, and prayed and listened to God. He sent them to speak to the rulers and people in both kingdoms about their sin and to lead the people back to righteousness and justice. The people did not receive God's mercy to listen and change, but this does not make the prophets God sent any less significant. The test of a prophet is outcome—a prophet's words are always fulfilled because they are God's words.

God called ordinary people to become prophets. Isaiah, for example, was a family man living in Jerusalem with a wife and at least two sons (Isaiah 7:3; 8:3). God also called some priests in the Old Testament. For example, God changed Ezekiel's career path as a priest (Ezekiel 1:3) to become a prophet to speak God's messages to the rebellious people (2:7). Jeremiah was the son of Hilkiah, a priest, but even while Jeremiah was still in the womb, God set him apart and appointed him to be "a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5).

True prophets always have been people who seek God, listen to Him, and obey. They are people who study Scripture, pray, and spend time with God. Because of these dominant characteristics, prophets do not make their own messages. God gives their message and tells them how to communicate it. This is why it was no problem when Jeremiah argued that he didn't know how to speak

and that he wasn't ready (Jeremiah 1:6). God always equips His prophets.

The Old Testament prophets lived in, and spoke into, periods of national and international upheaval—times that are somewhat like ours. These are times when justice is not always well known, not always applied, often challenged, and desperately needed. Like it was with prophets in the Old Testament times, believers who try to share God's message today may not be appreciated or well liked. But such people also know that God is the source of their message and that when they follow Him, they show God's mercy to the world. They have the assurance that when they study well, devote time to be with God, pray, and listen, then God directs the words and the actions that will bring justice into a world in upheaval.

May this series of daily devotionals be a resource for your time with God each day. May they help you know God's message for justice in the world. And when you do speak and act for justice in the world, remember that like the prophets of old, our words and actions are to be God's message. He works through His message to bring justice, salvation, and transformation that come only through the grace and mercy of the greatest of prophets—Jesus Christ, who is Priest, Prophet, and Savior.

**Scott Stewart, Editor**



March 1

## The Heart of Our Worship

**“Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them” (Amos 5:22).**

**Scripture:** Amos 5:18-24

**Song:** “Psalm 51—A Broken Spirit and Contrite Heart”

“But I’ve been good all day!” she exclaimed when her request for a new phone was denied. The child’s look of disbelief that one day’s performance would not be enough quickly changed to an expression of being perplexed. And then frustration emerged as this mom told her 11-year-old that a phone required more than one day’s obedience. Her mom was encouraging a heart devoted to righteousness—the source of sustained obedience for the sake of pleasing God, not for what you can get.

Just as a parent longs for her child’s obedience to stem from more than the desire for a single object, God desires more than our ceremonious acts. The psalmist David cried out this truth: “You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise” (Psalm 51:16, 17). The motivations behind our obedience and worship matter. Sincere worship and a long obedience stem from a contrite spirit and heartfelt desire to honor God.

**Lord,** please continue to work in my heart so my sacrifice and worship may be pleasing to You. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Wronged by God?

**“Though I call for help, there is no justice” (Job 19:7).**

**Scripture:** Job 19:1-7

**Song:** “Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending”

In 1987, former Secretary of Labor Raymond Donovan was indicted for larceny and fraud in a business relationship. The case was bitter and widely publicized. In the end a jury acquitted Donovan, and he is quoted as saying to the media: “Which office do I go to, to get my reputation back?”

All of us experience injustices: we have not received something good that we should have received, or we have received something bad that we should not have received. After five bitter exchanges between a suffering Job and his three myopic friends, Job lashed out against their injustice. He said, in effect, “You cannot put your finger on any wrongdoing on my part. If God allows you to smear my reputation on the basis of my circumstances and not on the basis of clear misconduct, then He has wronged me.” Then Job cried out in anger against the ongoing silence of God’s justice.

In our day, justice is becoming much more fluid, and injustice is becoming a formidable force. To withstand the storm surge of unresolved injustice in our day, Job’s earlier expression of faith must be ours: “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him” (Job 13:15).

**Sovereign, holy, and just judge of all**, grant us hearts of patient faith when wrongly judged, and hearts alert against the temptation to judge beyond the boundaries Jesus set for us. In Christ, amen.

## The Doctor's Smile

**Let my teaching fall like rain** (Deuteronomy 32:2).

**Scripture:** Deuteronomy 32:1-4

**Song:** “This Is My Father’s World”

The doctor smiled as he arrived to report on my mother’s CT scan; and he kept smiling as he explained the discovery of advanced, inoperable bronchial cancer—and the limited time remaining for her to be with us. That smile is etched in my memory as being out of place and out of touch; and it resurfaces when I read today’s text and the verses that follow.

Like the doctor’s smile, this final song Moses gave to Israel begins with 4 stanzas of gentle spring rains and sparkling morning dew. However, the remaining 39 stanzas pound to the beat of a drum of national unfaithfulness, relentless trauma, and divine vengeance. I can appreciate the showers and dew; but as the tone changes, it takes a moment for me to realize that the rest of the text is not about a terminal diagnosis. Verse 36 holds the key: “The LORD will vindicate his people.” That phrase underscores why a hymn writer was correct in saying: “Though the wrong is oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.”

Before we can adequately struggle with our own experiences of injustice, and before we can put down the newspaper without being discouraged or enraged, we must understand that there is a bigger story unfolding, and it is being overseen by a really big God in whose hands we can leave our heart’s cry for justice (Romans 12:19).

**Father**, give us grace to see Your smile in our darkness, and to know that the news behind it, even when long in coming, will be good. In Christ, amen.

## Bitter Cupfuls

**“I will make my words in your mouth a fire”** (Jeremiah 5:14).

**Scripture:** Jeremiah 5:14-19

**Song:** “O Little Flock, Fear Not the Foe”

Thankfully, the indignity of lower GI exploratory procedures is buffered by unconsciousness. The gallon of liquid solution which must be drunk beforehand is another matter. Remembering this may help us think about the full cup of iniquity that describes God’s ways in judgment (Psalm 75:7, 8).

The bitter-cupful principle began in Eden. There God postponed the death sentence, and allowed the first couple to experience the folly of claiming godhood. Since then we have each taken our turn squeezing the spoiled grapes of sin for ourselves.

Before us are two cups. Mercifully, one is a medicinal cup. It is full of the life consequences of sins, and it may be filled several times. This is the cup that Jeremiah’s scorching message put before Israel. It is not about justice; it is about discipline—and in Israel’s case it would be served by the unjust hands of a wicked nation. Its objective was (and is) discipline and repentance (Hebrews 12:7-12). The other cup is the final one. It will be served by the just hand of our holy God on the threshold of eternity. But for many, this is an empty cup—not because they have never sinned, but because they have repented of their claim to godhood. For them Jesus drank the bitter cup on dark Calvary (Colossians 2:13, 14).

**Just judge of all,** thank You for an empty cup of wrath. Help me be patient when I need a medicinal cup of discipline. In Christ, amen.



## Whose Mess Is This?

**“Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed”**  
(Habakkuk 1:5).

**Scripture:** Habakkuk 1:5-11

**Song:** “Set My Soul Afire”

In the days when only one color transmitter existed, workers owned the few TV sets that could receive the color signal. Wanting to impress some friends, one worker asked a technician to broadcast something colorful. The technician chose a basket of fruit in which he placed a blue banana. The result was several moments of frustration as the television owner tried to correct the banana’s color without discoloring everything else.

The screen of man’s history shows a chaos of malformed, off-color relationships tumbled together in a basket full of injustice. One finds more than blue bananas in the 24-7 news feeds of modern media. Men and women, heirs of the godhood status Adam wanted, are failed deities who can’t get truth right, but who continue to pretend they can. And as they continue to pretend, they continue to fill the basket with battles for turf—from living room to neighborhood to the international stage.

As followers of Christ we must not let ourselves agree with the world’s false indictment of God for mismanagement. Neither must we try to stand aloof as though we had not contributed to the problem. It was, after all, our sin which brought us to Christ for salvation; and we are still a sanctified people in the process of shedding our own petty kingdoms.

**God,** grant us the clarity of spirit to remember it is not You—it is we, Adam’s heirs, who contribute to this world’s mess. Help us who have come to Christ for forgiveness to bring better fruit to the table. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

## Life Is More Than Plankton

**By his net he lives in luxury** (Habakkuk 1:16).

**Scripture:** Habakkuk 1:15-17

**Song:** “Make Me a Blessing”

Acres of coastal waters turn reddish as upwellings hoist nutrients and billions of tiny plankton to the surface. Behind them come schools of small fish; and behind those come dolphins and towers of tuna, followed by sharks and killer whales. For days the waters seethe in a massive feeding frenzy. It is a picture of the history of nations—godless people feeding on each other until the chaos calls for someone with a net to haul them in.

Habakkuk used the image of idolatrous fishermen to describe stronger man-gods filling their nets with lesser man-gods for their own enjoyment. Jesus warned His disciples against the passion of nations for banquets and high fashion (Luke 12:22-30). When asked to help a man get his rightful inheritance, He refused and added, “Beware of covetousness” (Luke 12:15, *KJV*).

The temptation to be led into the world’s whirl of commercialism is not overcome by becoming a complainer of its greed-motivated injustices. Jesus tells us to seek above all else the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Luke 12:31). No matter where we are being tossed about in the feeding frenzy of nations, we need not lust for our “fair share” of the plankton. Our role is to be fishers of men for the Lord who can give them life.

**Lord Jesus**, empower us to seek souls for their good and Your glory. For Your glory, amen.

## **“Bullyhood”**

**When the LORD has finished all his work against Mount Zion . . .** (Isaiah 10:12).

**Scripture:** Isaiah 10:12-14

**Song:** “In My Life, Lord, Be Glorified”

It might be an all-too-familiar scene: a two-bit intimidator taunting a vulnerable newcomer at school. Matters escalate until the newcomer proves himself less vulnerable than the bully dared to hope. But there is still the possibility of the beaten bully drawing in a circle of wannabe bullies to help him even the score.

Here are two clichés worth knowing: “There is no such thing as getting even” and “The issue is control.” Of all the lusts that drive quarrels, control is at the core (James 4:1, 2). This is why history records the failure of man’s ability to manage good and evil. The result has been a world of escalating conflicts. In Scripture God shows how He uses our bent to bullying to discipline His chosen people. In today’s text, the bully of choice was Assyria. However, like all bullies, Assyria would flaunt its “bullyhood” until God let another thug (Babylon) into the ring. This process will continue until the most horrible bully of all time will have his day . . . and his destruction.

We who trust Christ should be warned that God can use even our times of disobedience to serve His purposes; but there is no reward in it. Our calling is to a life of good works done in the light of His grace. Our task is not to get even but to give the gospel.

**Gracious, forgiving God,** may we know the superior power of giving grace instead of getting even. In our Savior’s name, amen.

## “The State Inspector Will Be Here This Week”

**The wicked hem in the righteous, so that the law is perverted** (Habakkuk 1:4).

**Scripture:** Habakkuk 1:1-4, 12-14

**Song:** “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”

The words of today’s title always distressed the director of our youth camp ministry. Thankfully, he and the inspector had a good working relationship, and the director learned the importance of leaving at least one thing to be “discovered.” Other directors were not so privileged. They worked with people who had an agenda beyond camper safety—an agenda that resented the camp’s existence.

People with power agendas recognize the role that rules play, and they have sought platforms from which they can bring on a misery by law (Psalm 94:20), which applies pressure by means of legal mischief. Both Nebuchadnezzar and Darius give us prime examples. Today churches and Christian ministries can be shut down for physical compliance failures. The day approaches when compliance will go beyond safety issues. That day will bring demands for a redefinition—that wrong be called “right” and right becomes “wrong.” And for a time, the voices of truth and moral accountability will be over-ruled, but ultimately not silenced.

As followers of Jesus, we must prepare ourselves to stand when others bow (Daniel 3), to pray when others don’t (Daniel 6), and to identify with Jesus in a culture whose hatred for Him sets the legal agenda (John 15:18, 19).

**Father,** we long for the day when You will revoke Adam’s rebellious choice. In the meantime, we reaffirm the surrender of our own temptation to want personal sovereignty. In Jesus’ name, amen.



## Heart Cries

**Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD** (Psalm 130:1).

**Scripture:** Psalm 130

**Song:** “O Come to the Altar”

One of my favorite spots in the sanctuary is the altar. A former minister once called it “a convenient place to pray.” It is certainly that. Over the years seekers and saints have knelt there, pouring out their burdens and sins to God. Many tears have stained its wood, including my own.

One Sunday after a moving sermon, the altar filled with people needing to talk to God. From my seat, I couldn’t see faces; I just heard the low tones of earnest supplications. However, one woman’s voice rose above the others. She didn’t just pray; she sobbed. Only God knows what need she brought to that sacred place. Perhaps it was a personal loss or confession of sin.

This woman’s expression of deep sorrow is how I imagine the psalmist sounded when he cried out to God. His words in Psalm 130 remind us that true confession of sin isn’t a trivial act; it is genuine, from the depths of the human soul that God alone can reach. I find comfort knowing that we don’t need to kneel at an altar to confess sin. We can cry out to God anytime, anywhere, knowing He will forgive and show mercy.

**Lord**, help me keep short accounts with You. Make my heart tender and ready to confess my sin wherever I am. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Decision Time

**“If they had heeded the warning, they would have saved themselves”** (Ezekiel 33:5).

**Scripture:** Ezekiel 33:1-9

**Song:** “Just As I Am”

Memories of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001—planes crashing into the Twin Towers, the structures collapsing, and people fleeing for their lives—will remain a deep wound for years. Days after, many Christians wondered if this tragedy was God’s wake-up call to our country. Billy Graham was one of them. Three days after the attacks, he took the pulpit in the National Cathedral to console a nation struggling with fear and grief. But he also challenged them, saying that our country needs a spiritual renewal—to repent and return to God. For a short time, this seemed to be happening. The Sunday after the attacks, churches were packed with people who didn’t normally attend. But that spiritual high tide didn’t last long. Once the chaos cooled, most of that temporary crowd went on with their lives.

When Ezekiel wrote this part of his book, tragedy had already struck the Israelites. God had brought the sword of justice upon them because of their long history of sin and rebellion. So God renewed Ezekiel’s role as watchman to warn the Israelites to repent. It was decision time. If they heard the warning but ignored it, they would die.

Such a warning remains for us today. God still calls His wandering people to turn back to Him and be saved from their sins.

**Lord,** Your call to repent isn’t just a general appeal; it’s for me personally. Give me a heart that pays attention to any wake-up calls in my life. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Mistaken Identity

**“Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me” (Matthew 25:45).**

**Scripture:** Matthew 25:41-46

**Song:** “I Want to Be Like Jesus”

One evening sometime ago, I watched reports of a hurricane that devastated US cities. People escaped their homes with just the clothes on their backs and some items in bags. They returned to find piles of rubble instead of their houses. When the news continued to the day's next story, the faces of those hurricane victims faded, and I quickly forgot their plight. I'm ashamed that, even after just a few days, I didn't feel the tug on my heart as I first did, and I never wrote a check to assist them.

In today's reading, Jesus speaks harsh words for people like me who see a need and fail to act. Indifference is the opposite of His character. In His earthly ministry, Jesus showed compassion for those with little or nothing, who were sick or marginalized. Psalm 146:7 describes His heart: “He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry.” In Matthew 25, Jesus says His followers must share in His mission to the oppressed and hungry, as well as others. If we don't, we aren't just failing those people; we're also failing Him.

The needs around us may not be on the grand scale of a natural disaster. We don't have to look far to find them. Shut-ins, prisoners, the homeless—whoever we come across to help in our daily lives, we must recognize that Jesus is the one we're really serving.

**Lord**, it's easy for me to pass by needy people. Help me see You when I see them. In Jesus' name, amen.

## Agony and Ecstasy

**“Though [the revelation] linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay” (Habakkuk 2:3).**

**Scripture:** Habakkuk 2:1-5

**Song:** “What a Day That Will Be”

The toughest wait for me as a kid came the weeks before Christmas. Once the Montgomery Ward catalog arrived in the mail, my sisters and I pored over every page and marked the items we wanted. We watched advertisements for toys on TV and couldn't sleep on Christmas Eve, thinking about the gifts we'd asked for. The next morning we tore through wrapping paper to find our presents. The agonizing wait was worth the ecstasy of the moment. Now as an adult, I still find it agonizing to wait—but not for Christmas. I long for the Lord's return ushering us into Heaven. The prophet Habakkuk has a word for me: wait. He spoke it to the Israelites who had suffered at the hands of the Babylonians and longed for justice. It would come—but in God's time.

The writer of Hebrews quotes Habakkuk's words, connecting them to Christ's return (Hebrews 10:37). Christ too will come—in the Father's time. As the anticipation builds, I pore over verses such as Revelation 21:4, which promise that God will wipe away our tears and that there will be no more death, mourning, crying, or pain.

There's an “appointed time” for the revelation to be fulfilled, and we wait in steady faith. But rest assured, it will happen. What ecstasy that will be!

**Lord,** with so much turmoil in the world, it's hard to wait for Your return. Help me hold steady, knowing that what You promised will be fulfilled. In Jesus' name, amen.



## Day of Reckoning

**“The cup from the LORD’s right hand is coming around to you”** (Habakkuk 2:16).

**Scripture:** Habakkuk 2:15-17

**Song:** “Sovereign Over Us”

The plots of so many movies, TV shows, and books involve good versus evil. The bad guy may rob a bank, destroy property, or take innocent lives. Then the hero appears, and conflict ensues. For a time it seems that evil is winning and victory for the good is impossible. We find ourselves demanding justice and for good to triumph in the end.

In many ways, this short section of Habakkuk reads like a typical good-versus-evil plot. Packed into three verses is a sampling of the dastardly deeds of the Babylonians—the bad guys. God speaks of their reputation for violence, bloodshed, and idolatry. It seems unthinkable that He would use this evil empire to bring judgment on His people, but His righteousness demanded punishment for their wrongs. For Israel, things would be dark for 70 years, after the bad guys took them into captivity. But one line in this Scripture reminds us who is really in charge. The Lord would one day pour out His wrath on Babylon.

This truth encourages us. Evil runs rampant and gets worse every day in our world. The Bible predicts such a time as this (2 Timothy 3:1-4). But Habakkuk reminds us that there are limits on what God allows. Someday the tables will turn. God’s wrath will be poured out, and justice will be served.

**Lord,** I get discouraged by what I see and the sin surrounding me. Help me remember that Your righteousness will prevail. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## The Danger of Idols

**“The one who makes [an idol] trusts in his own creation”**  
(Habakkuk 2:18).

**Scripture:** Habakkuk 2:18-20

**Song:** “I’d Rather Have Jesus”

I watched an online video on how idols are made in Far East and Southeast Asian countries. In the video a craftsman shapes a Bahubali Ganesh idol from a clay casting. The god Ganesh has the head of an elephant. Its arms, legs, and torso resemble a human, and it is finished off with an elaborate headpiece, jewelry, and colorful paint.

We don’t need the Internet to help us visualize idols in Habakkuk’s day; God describes them in today’s reading. The Babylonians, famous for idolatry, made idols from wood and stone, and God rebuked them for it. Though the images could not speak and had no breath, they posed a great danger. What the Babylonians made with their hands had a direct link to their hearts: they ignored the Creator of the universe in favor of their creations. This blatant disregard for God would be yet another link in the city’s destruction.

We find it easy to cheer the justice that God eventually leveled on Babylon for its sins, yet we ignore the idols of our own making. They may not be constructed out of wood, stone, or clay, but they are just as dangerous to our relationship with God. Money and possessions might be obvious ones. But what about relationships, popularity, sports, jobs, addictions, and even ministry? Anything or anyone can consume our time and devotion. If we’re not careful, they can take first place in our hearts—to our undoing.

**Lord**, there are many people and activities in my life. Give me the courage to examine myself to see where I may be putting them ahead of You. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## The Last Word

**“The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea”** (Habakkuk 2:14).

**Scripture:** Habakkuk 2:6-14

**Song:** “How Great Is Our God”

Historical sources describe the grandeur of ancient Babylon. Its walls were imposing and solid. Its Hanging Gardens ranked as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Its cultural learning center excelled in astrology, medicine, and mathematics.

The Bible doesn’t speak of Babylon in such favorable terms, however. The word is synonymous with wanton bloodshed and pride. In today’s reading, God captured the exploits of this empire that had swept through cities and would take His people into captivity—by His design. God issued warnings against Babylon and reinforced them with the word “woe.” The days would come when great Babylon would be brought low. Her walls would be crushed, her landscape leveled, and her learning silenced. Everyone would recognize the knowledge of the Lord—that He punishes sin and establishes justice. God always has the last word.

God made good on His warnings. In His time, He unleashed destruction on Babylon in a display of divine power. Today the once boastful city is nothing more than ruins.

*Babylon* is a byword indicating that pomp and power are eventually brought down by God, and it serves as a warning to us. No one is greater than God, and nothing is permanent on this planet. One day the earth will be destroyed. God will have the last word.

**Lord**, greatness tends to impress me. Remind me daily how much greater You are than anything or anyone. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Hope in Our Eternal God

**Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God** (Psalm 146:5).

**Scripture:** Psalm 146

**Song:** “We Trust in the Name of the Lord Our God”

It is recorded that James Garfield, Civil War veteran and lawyer, was on Wall Street when the news broke that President Abraham Lincoln had died. Chaos broke out while crowds of fearful people gathered in the streets. Garfield, who was not yet well known in the public, longed to give people hope and rose to give an impromptu speech. “Fellow citizens!” he said. “Clouds and darkness are round about Him! His pavilion is dark waters and thick clouds of the skies! Justice and judgment are the establishment of His throne! Mercy and truth shall go before His face! Fellow citizens! God reigns, and the government at Washington still lives!” The crowd was calmed. We know that Garfield’s presidency was cut short in 1881, four months after his inauguration. And still, Lincoln’s and Garfield’s hopes for the nation, and especially justice for the oppressed, have not fully come to fruition.

All earthly leadership terms come to an end. Ministers retire. Family leaders pass away. The psalmist reminds us that we are blessed to have our help and our hope in the Lord our God. Unlike the reign of human leaders, God’s reign is forever. God is actively giving justice to the oppressed throughout His eternal reign.

**Dear Lord,** thank You for being the eternal help and hope for all generations. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Finding the Right Definition

**Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter** (Isaiah 5:20).

**Scripture:** Isaiah 5:18-24

**Song:** “Yes, We All Agree”

As a toddler, my son knew that a kitten was soft and furry, with whiskers and a long tail. It was perfectly reasonable that the first time he saw a raccoon, he pointed and said, “Kitty!” I corrected him. He wrinkled up his little nose and turned to me with a look of shock. “Kitty!” he said again, more firmly this time. I repeated my correction. He would not change his view even after a couple more rounds. He is now 14 years old and, thankfully, knows the difference between a kitten and a raccoon. Somewhere along the line, he agreed with my definition.

We may begin our Christian lives with the world’s definitions of good and evil. As we grow in our knowledge and love for the Lord, we learn to agree with God’s definitions. It takes work and willingness to change, but accepting God’s definitions is always for our good. Sex outside of marriage is not God’s good plan, no matter how old or young we are. Being impatient or unkind toward people is not God’s good plan, even if we think people deserve such treatment.

Study how God defines good and evil in His Word. Make the effort to change your life to show that you agree with His definitions.

**Heavenly Father,** in this world’s mix of what is good and what is evil, increase my desire to live in agreement with Your definition of goodness. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Look Past What You See

**He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth** (Isaiah 11:3, 4).

**Scripture:** Isaiah 11:1-5

**Song:** “Make Me a Blessing”

There is a homeless woman who walks the streets in my town. For the first year I lived here, when I passed her by, I wondered why she didn't just go get a job. One day I went to a restaurant for lunch. No one else was dining in it except for this woman. I felt the Holy Spirit urging me to talk to her. I resisted at first. I felt unsafe. Finally I obeyed. I asked her name, gave her a fast-food gift card, and listened to her story. It was clear that “just getting a job” would not fix her homelessness. There was more to her situation than what my eyes could see.

When Jesus looked out at the crowds of poor and needy people, His heart filled with compassion (Matthew 9:36). He looked beyond their ragged appearance to the how and why of their situations. He healed, loved, provided, and protected. He administered justice with wisdom and righteousness, just like Isaiah foretold He would.

While we await Christ's return, we can be God's instruments of justice. Look to the poor and needy in your community. Lean in to the Holy Spirit's nudging to provide for them.

**Dear God,** thank You for Your justice poured out with wisdom and righteousness. Give me a heart of compassion and feet quick to action. In Jesus' name, amen.

## The Bearer of Bad News

**But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression, to Israel his sin (Micah 3:8).**

**Scripture:** Micah 3:5-8

**Song:** “Where the Spirit of the Lord Is”

The musical *Fiddler on the Roof* is set in the early 1900s in the remote Russian village of Anatevka. The Jewish people in the town want to know the news from the outside world. A neighbor rushes out to the town center with a newspaper tucked under his arm. The Jewish men ask what the paper says, so the neighbor reads about the Russians forcing the Jewish people out of the country. The Jewish men complain to the neighbor that he brings only bad news for them. The man replies that he doesn’t make the news; he just reads it.

Micah was a bearer of bad news. God made him a prophet to draw attention to the Jewish people’s sins in hopes that they would turn back to God. While false prophets abandoned God’s truth to tell the people what they wanted to hear (for a price), Micah told the truth.

The Holy Spirit gave Micah the power to share God’s truth with justice and with might. The same Holy Spirit gives us the strength to declare God’s truth even when the message may not be pleasant for us to speak or for people to hear.

**Our Father and Lord,** I pray that I would depend on the Holy Spirit’s power to help me declare Your truth even when it is hard. In Jesus’ name, amen.



## Remember Your Journey

**“Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of the LORD” (Micah 6:5).**

**Scripture:** Micah 6:1-5

**Song:** “Faith of Our Fathers”

My mother, a genealogist, has uncovered the stories of our ancestors. These include narratives about Samuel Gorton (the cofounder of Rhode Island) and Edward Robins (who helped settle Chincoteague Island, Virginia, now famous for its wild ponies). Other ancestral stories are more recent. My paternal grandparents met while serving in World War II, because of some misdirected mail. My maternal grandparents started attending a Bible-preaching church when my mother was 12 years old, and she became a believer. My mother studied at a seminary, which is where she met my father. Each of these stories is part of my story.

God told the Israelites to remember all that He had done for them. Micah relayed the message that they were to remember freedom from slavery in Egypt and protection from the threatened curse of Balaam. However, the people Micah spoke to had not been alive when these events occurred. God was calling them to remember what He had done for the generation of people who had gone before them. What God had done for the people in their past, He had done for them.

God wants us to remember our journeys. This includes what we have been eyewitness to and what God has done for the previous generations of our biological families and our faith families.

**Dear God,** thank You for all You have done in my lifetime and in the lives of those who have gone before me. In Jesus' name, amen.

## The Surprise Packages

**Listen! The LORD is calling to the city—and to fear your name is wisdom—“Heed the rod and the One who appointed it”** (Micah 6:9).

**Scripture:** Micah 6:9-16

**Song:** “Take My Life and Let It Be”

A 6-year-old girl from Utah asked her mom to check on when the Barbie doll she’d ordered online would be delivered. The girl watched very carefully as mom checked the online shopping account. Once mom left the room, the girl browsed the website and added a few more things to the order. When the sneaky order was delivered a few days later, mom was shocked. The girl had ordered almost 400 dollars’ worth of toys! The boxes piled up higher than the girl’s head. Mom wisely did not let the girl keep the extra toys. She took the girl to a local children’s hospital and required her to give the toys away.

God announced that the Israelites would not be able to keep what they had gained dishonestly. Instead, they would be handed over to ruin and destruction. At first, this punishment might sound harsh. But a loving and fair God could not allow the people to benefit from the way they had cheated their customers and neighbors.

God is just and does not allow us to get away with deceit. When we recognize dishonesty in our lives, we can repent and ask the Lord for forgiveness. He calls us to deal justly, with truth and honesty.

**Dear Lord,** thank You for Your justice and thank You for sending Jesus in my place to take the punishment for my sin. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Fixing the Microwave

**He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8).**

**Scripture:** Micah 3:1-3, 9-12; 6:6-8 **Song:**  
“There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy”

I was frustrated with my husband. I wanted him to change some things about the way he related to me. After sharing with him, I went to the grocery store. When I came back, I stepped into the kitchen and noticed that the microwave had been moved. I asked him why he had moved the microwave. He said, “I’m not sure . . . I think I just needed to fix something!” We looked at it and burst out laughing. In his desire to fix the relationship, he “fixed” the microwave instead.

The leaders of God’s people were distorting justice. Yet they tried to fix it the wrong way. It was not sacrifices and burnt offerings that would fix the injustice that they were involved in. God wanted them to simply start doing the right thing.

The Lord requires the same from us today, especially from the leaders of His people. God is not as concerned with our outward religious rituals as He is concerned that we treat others with justice and mercy. When we pour energy into merciful acts toward others, we are at the same time strengthening our relationship with the Lord.

**Heavenly Father,** I want to act justly when I am given opportunity to do so. I pray that I would be more concerned about how I treat others than about how holy I look. In Jesus’ name, amen.

March 23

## Heavenly Reflections

**The heavens proclaim his righteousness, for he is a God of justice** (Psalm 50:6).

**Scripture:** Psalm 50:1-15

**Song:** “God of Wonders”

Yesterday my husband and I spent 15 hours in our car, returning home from a visit with family. We passed quite a few billboards along the way. Although we could have searched for nearby restaurants on our smartphones, that large sign with pictures of barbecued ribs informed my husband of what he wanted for lunch. Another sign pointed out a state welcome center where he found the updated map he needed. I was interested in the sign that promised clean restrooms at the truck stop ahead. We even saw one billboard available for rent that proclaimed: “Made you look!”

The sky above us is a giant billboard proclaiming God’s majesty. The first chapter of Romans explains that God’s invisible qualities are revealed through His creation. Whenever we look up or around us at the work of God’s hands, we get glimpses of His nature and power. We can let the heavens remind us of our Creator throughout the day. The sunrise confirms that He has a plan and a purpose for the day. Whether the weather is sunny or stormy, we can remember that He controls it all. Every evening the sunset assures us of His protection through the night. The skies above contain heavenly reflections for anyone who cares to look.

**O Father,** open my eyes to the evidence of Your power and presence all around me today. Amen.

## Searching for Perfection

**“Do not bring anything with a defect, because it will not be accepted on your behalf”** (Leviticus 22:20).

**Scripture:** Leviticus 22:17-25

**Song:** “Perfect Sacrifice”

When I saw the ceramic pencil cups painted like animals, I knew my granddaughter would love the unicorn one. But the first cup I picked up had an obvious bubble in the glaze. The next one felt rough on the bottom. This one had a crooked line for the mouth; that one had irregularities in the paint on the horn. *Why do I always do this?* I wondered. The gift would cost less than 10 dollars; yet I knew I would inspect every single one on the shelf, looking for the best one.

The Israelites were to inspect their animals when they chose one for a sacrifice. As a reflection of God’s holy nature, the animal had to be free from any physical defects or it would not be acceptable in His eyes. This foreshadowed Jesus, who would live a sinless life and then offer Himself as the ultimate and perfect sacrifice. His death and resurrection ended the need for animals to be slaughtered as atonement for sins.

On my own I can never come close enough to perfection to be acceptable to God. Some days I wonder how He can even love me with all my defects and blemishes. On those days, I’m tempted to obsess about my imperfections. But I’m learning instead to thank Jesus for His sacrifice on my behalf, and then commit anew to giving Him the best of all that I am.

**Jesus,** thank You for offering Yourself as the only way I could be cleansed of my sin. In Your name, amen.

## Honoring His Name

**“My name will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets” (Malachi 1:11).**

**Scripture:** Malachi 1:11-14

**Song:** “What a Beautiful Name It Is”

The instructor of a marketing class pointed out that best-selling authors have a recognizable brand. In other words, whenever we hear an author’s name or see it on a book, we know what to expect—whether it’s science fiction based on space travel, wholesome romance, or a thriller involving an attorney. I think the same can be said of our friends and family members. Often we know what we can expect before we interact with them. We may associate a person’s name with humor, gossip, deep fulfilling conversation, or even self-absorbed prattle.

People respond in different ways when they hear God’s name mentioned. They may picture a benevolent “man upstairs” or an angry deity waiting to punish them for messing up. Others think of a loving Father ready to guide, protect, and provide. God is very concerned about the reputation of His name. He wants everyone all over the world to have an accurate view of what His name stands for—not just so He will receive the praise and glory He deserves, but so that more people will enter into a relationship with Him.

As followers of Christ, we represent His name. Everything we say and do should reflect His character. Each day is filled with opportunities to bring honor to His name and influence the way people around us view Him. What a privilege to help others get a clear picture of the Lord we love!

**Lord,** may all my conversation and behavior glorify Your name today. Amen.

## Unwavering Faithfulness

**Be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful** (Malachi 2:16).

**Scripture:** Malachi 2:10-16

**Song:** “Great Is Thy Faithfulness”

I read about an elderly man in New York who walked six miles round-trip every day to visit his wife in the hospital. He admitted that he could wait for his daughter or someone else to give him a ride. But instead, he set out on his daily trek each morning regardless of the weather. After his wife was diagnosed with a brain tumor several years before, she'd been hospitalized numerous times. With each hospital stay, this husband faithfully visited her every day, considering it not an inconvenience but a privilege.

People take notice when someone demonstrates such a level of selfless devotion and commitment. But God calls us to live this way every day. He expects us to stay faithful to our word, to family relationships, to our work and ministry obligations, and especially to Him. Being faithful to God begins with nurturing our relationship with Him by guarding our devotional time.

It's tempting to occasionally compromise in some area of commitment, especially when we're feeling overwhelmed. We don't always feel like giving our best to our job or family responsibilities. During busy times it may seem logical to skip our prayer time, personal Bible study, or church attendance. But we can rise above our feelings and self-centered human nature by remembering God's commitment to us. Since He never wavers in His faithfulness to us, we can find the strength and perseverance to live on a higher plane.

**Father**, thank You for Your promise that You will never leave or forsake me. In Jesus' name, amen.



## A Long and Painful Process

**“He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver” (Malachi 3:3).**

**Scripture:** Malachi 2:17–3:4

**Song:** “Refiner’s Fire”

For several years my husband worked at the smelter of a copper mining company in Utah. From a gigantic open pit, the ore is extracted, broken into smaller pieces, and concentrated into a more usable form. Toward the end of the long smelting and refining process, the copper is heated to almost 2000 degrees and cast into plates that are 99.5 percent pure—but not pure enough. In the final step, plates are submerged into a chemical bath combined with electrical currents to remove the remaining impurities.

Each one of us is going through our own unique refining process supervised by God Himself. As soon as He extracted us from the death grip of sin, He began working to remove anything that contaminates our thinking and behavior. God uses people, circumstances, His Word, and the Holy Spirit to refine us. Sometimes God “turns up the heat” by sending or allowing trials; these seasons are painful but necessary.

We may grow impatient at our seemingly slow rate of spiritual growth, but God will bring it to completion. The further along we progress in our sanctification, the more usable we are to Him—and the deeper the fellowship we can enjoy with our “refiner.” We cannot attain a 100-percent pure heart and spirit. But our Savior is perfect, and He is our standard.

Thank You, **Father**, for promising to finish the good work of refining and purifying my heart. For Your glory, amen.

## Expect Unexpected Blessings

**“Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it” (Malachi 3:10).**

**Scripture:** Malachi 3:7-12

**Song:** “Showers of Blessing”

One November my daughter went to purchase supplies for her family's holiday dinner. She had no idea the store was giving away groceries off and on all day. Just as she entered, an employee announced that the next three customers wearing Thanksgiving-themed clothing would receive a free turkey. Just that morning my granddaughter had insisted on wearing her turkey sweatshirt to accompany her mom. My granddaughter unexpectedly received a free turkey because she was dressed in the right way, and was in the right place at the right time.

It's always fun to receive an unexpected gift or favor. In the Old Testament, people followed God's specific sacrifice procedures in order to receive forgiveness. The new covenant is different; in this system Christ's perfect sacrifice is the only one needed to provide forgiveness. We have the Lord's unconditional love and acceptance. But our choices help determine to what extent we live a blessed life.

God loves to shower His children with gifts. By nurturing our relationship with Him and pursuing a lifestyle of obedience, we put ourselves in a position to receive more of His blessings. As we follow Him we'll be in the right place for unexpected blessings.

**God,** thank You for being a loving and generous Father. Open my eyes to see and acknowledge the blessings You send my way today. In Christ, amen.

## Nothing but the Truth

**“True instruction was in [Levi’s] mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin” (Malachi 2:6).**

**Scripture:** Malachi 2:1-9; 3:5, 6

**Song:** “Ancient Words”

A while back, I was scrolling through my Facebook news feed and came across a post that stopped me cold. A friend had shared an urgent prayer request for a number of Christian missionaries scheduled for execution in a Muslim country the next day. I immediately prayed for the situation. Then I noticed that the original post was dated months previously. What happened to these believers? I wondered. A few minutes of searching for an update revealed that the prayer request was a hoax that had been circulating for years and with no factual basis.

Our culture bombards us daily with carefully crafted spin, fake news, and outright lies. Television and the Internet make it harder than ever to weed out misinformation. Wasting our time on a hoax can be annoying, but deception often carries far more serious consequences. If we base our lives on cultural standards, or anything other than the truth found in God’s Word, we are likely to make poor choices that range from self-centered to self-destructive.

The Bible is the one source we can always trust. It contains God’s instructions on how to have a thriving relationship with Him while living out the new life demanded of a Christ follower. We can depend on His Word to guide us in every decision we make so that we walk in uprightness every day.

**Lord,** help Your wisdom saturate my mind today and shape my attitudes, my conversation, and my behavior. Amen.

## By Faith, Not Deeds

**I do not have time to tell about [those] . . . who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised** (Hebrews 11:32, 33).

**Scripture:** Hebrews 11:29-35

**Song:** “By Faith”

Growing up, I was a “do, do, do” person. I played sports, joined the band, accompanied the choir, and worked hard for good grades. Deep down I knew my shortcomings, and I feared what others would think of me if they knew who I really was without all my outward good deeds.

When we read about the sacrifices God required of the Israelites in the Old Testament, we may think these people were saved because of what they did. Yet Hebrews 11 tells us the Old Testament heroes were saved by their faith. Faith separated the Israelites from the drowning Egyptians. Faith set Rahab apart from the destroyed city of Jericho. The individuals named in Hebrews 11 were praised for their actions, but faith in God enabled their deeds.

When we stop trying to do, do, do, we are better able to hear the truth of God’s Word speaking into our hearts. He doesn’t need our good deeds; He asks for our faith. He desires our surrender to relationship with Him. Surrendering often means an increasing awareness of our own shortcomings. But when we are weak, He makes us strong.

**God**, thank You for freedom from the strain of trying to be good enough. Please increase my faith in Your love and grace. In Christ, amen.

## A View from Below

**“Say to Daughter Zion, ‘See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey’”** (Matthew 21:5).

**Scripture:** Matthew 21:1-11

**Song:** “Thy Will”

“Life is like a needlepoint project,” said the man across from me. Our group sat in a circle on a Haitian rooftop. We had come to learn about Haiti’s culture and people; and despite the many obstacles Haitians faced, we were learning that hope was present as well. “We see the knotted mess on the bottom,” the man continued, “while God sees the beautiful picture on top.”

The crowds saw Jesus approaching on a donkey and recognized the fulfillment of prophecy, so they responded in joy. However, they understood only a part of what God was doing. They hoped He was bringing a conquering king to save them from Roman oppression, but God had something more glorious in mind—He intended to redeem their hearts.

Sometimes we misunderstand what God is doing. We think He should come riding into our lives on a strong warhorse and save the day, and if He doesn’t we’re disappointed. However, just because He doesn’t always work in the way we hope doesn’t mean He isn’t working. We can see only a part of the picture, and part of following Him means learning to trust that He is creating a tapestry more beautiful than we can yet imagine.

**Lord,** thank You for showing us in Your Word, time and time again, that Your plans are bigger than we can yet understand. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## For All Nations

**“Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers’” (Mark 11:17).**

**Scripture:** Mark 11:15-19

**Song:** “How Deep the Father’s Love for Us”

Six hundred years ago the opportunity to study God’s Word was rare, because it was written primarily in Latin, Hebrew, and Greek. In the 1380s, John Wycliffe began translating the Bible into English. Martin Luther, William Tyndale, and Myles Coverdale followed suit, translating the Word into the vernacular. Today millions of people now have access to God’s Word in their own languages.

In Jesus’ time, Gentiles didn’t have the same opportunities Jews did to worship God. The temple buyers and sellers were most likely operating out of the Court of the Gentiles, the only place in the temple where Gentiles were allowed to worship. By allowing the court to become a marketplace, the temple leaders not only violated the building’s holiness, but actually prevented Gentile worship. In cleansing the temple, Jesus restored its purity and the Gentiles’ place of worship.

What practices do we promote in our places of worship that may actually prevent true worship? Are we teaching about Jesus in such a way as to make the gospel accessible to everyone, regardless of their age, ethnicity, or education level? Jesus came for all people, and an important part of worship is working together to spread His message of grace to everyone.

**Jesus,** thank You for Your love and concern for all people. Please reveal the areas where I may need to make changes in my worship to welcome everyone. In Your name, amen.

April 2

## The Dangers of a Spotlight Faith

**“Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God” (Luke 11:42).**

**Scripture:** Luke 11:42-44

**Song:** “Humble”

Miss Valera taught elementary Sunday school for years, faithfully showing up each week despite many health challenges. She never looked for the spotlight—in fact, once when she felt she had complained too much about her health struggles, she called my parents to apologize. Her faith was genuine and humble; and when she passed away, hundreds came to her funeral and spoke of the influence she’d had on their lives.

As the Pharisees sought to keep their faith traditions unmarred by Roman influence, they created new “commandments” and became more concerned about outward appearances than about genuine love and worship of God. Some people respected and admired their apparent holiness, but Jesus rebuked their hypocrisy—making it clear they had missed the point. God is more concerned about the state of people’s hearts than He is about the number of things they do.

It is easy to become focused on checklists of things “good Christians” are supposed to do—attending church on Sunday mornings, reading our Bibles daily, praying for our friends or family. These are all good things that, when done with the right attitude, can grow our faith. But when we do these things to gain the spotlight rather than to draw closer to God, we too have missed the point.

**God**, please forgive me for the times I have pursued the spotlight rather than You. Help me seek a genuine relationship with You. In Jesus’ name, amen.



## A Quiet Kind of Justice

**“Here is my servant. . . . He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets”** (Matthew 12:18, 19).

**Scripture:** Matthew 12:15-21

**Song:** “Victory in Jesus”

During the pre–Civil War era, a few fiery abolitionists thought that the way to justice was through force. But in Boston, minister Leonard Grimes pursued a different path. When he discovered that a faithful parishioner, Anthony Burns, was being sent back into slavery because of the Fugitive Slave Act, he hurriedly raised funds to buy Burns from his owner. A corrupt marshal thwarted Grimes’s plans, but the minister didn’t give up. Grimes raised funds again and traveled south to find Burns, buy him, and set him free.

Jesus had His moments of fire-and-brimstone preaching, as we can see in His condemnations of the Pharisees (Matthew 23). Overall, though, He spread a quiet kind of justice. His actions were still radical—He touched victims of leprosy, welcomed the hated tax collector as His disciple, and set free the woman caught in adultery. But He rarely turned to violent, dramatic demonstrations of justice. Sometimes when He healed, He even warned the recipients not to speak of what He had done for them.

Figuring out how to pursue justice well can be hard, but Jesus’ example gives us a place to start. He proved that justice didn’t have to be noisy, quarrelsome, or violent to be victorious. His quiet compassion and faithful proclamation of the truth provide a model that is both radical and just.

**Lord Jesus,** when the world sends us conflicting messages about the pursuit of justice, teach us to look to You for truth and direction. In Your name, amen.

April 4

## Out of Darkness

**“I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them” (Isaiah 42:16).**

**Scripture:** Isaiah 42:10-17

**Song:** “Marvelous Light”

During a trip to Iceland, my brother and I had the opportunity to go lava caving. At one point, our guide had us sit down and turn out our headlamps so that we could experience the full effect of the darkness. I realized then how utterly dependent we were on our guide. If he had left us, I would have had no idea which direction to go to escape the dark. Thankfully, he was a good guide and brought us safely back out into the light.

In many ways, the people of Israel were as spiritually blind as I was physically blind in that cave. God promised not to forsake His people in the darkness but to lead them through it. All they had to do was trust Him.

God’s offer to provide direction through darkness is still good today. Trusting in a God we cannot see can be difficult, yet step-by-step He will draw back the darkness and reveal the path we should take. And with each step, our faith in Him will increase as He proves himself faithful, again and again and again. All we need to do is trust enough to take the first step.

**Lord,** thank You for guiding us when we can’t see the path before us. Increase our ability to trust You, and give us courage to take continuing steps of faith with You. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## God's Persistent Compassion

**“I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols”**  
(Isaiah 42:8).

**Scripture:** Isaiah 42:1-9

**Song:** “The Love of God”

My parents have a pretty, athletic border collie who is both sweet and smart. But she has a bad habit of digging. My parents have tried various methods to discourage her, including filling the holes she's dug, putting little black booties on her feet, and laying down chain-link panels in her favorite digging sections. They'll scold her, and she'll look ashamed . . . but eventually she'll come inside with telltale muddy paws yet again.

Throughout the Old Testament, God's people abandoned their Creator for a life of idolatry. He warned them, disciplined them, showed them a better way—but again and again they went digging around in the same old pits of idolatry. God was fiercely determined not to yield His glory to idols, but His love for His people persisted. He would find a new way to reach them: through His chosen servant, the coming Messiah. The servant demonstrated God's persistent compassion to His people, showing light to the blind and bringing the lost home.

Despite our patterns of idolatry, disobedience, and misunderstandings of His purpose, God's compassion is never-ending. He sent His Son to walk with us, to teach us, and to show us a better way. In Jesus' death, He set us free forever from the sin that held us captive.

**God,** You deserve all our praise and glory. Forgive us for turning to lesser things and forgetting Your glory. Thank You for sending Jesus to set us free. In our Savior's name, amen.

April 6

## Amazed by the Resurrection

**They went out quickly, and fled from the sepulcher; for they trembled and were amazed** (Mark 16:8, *KJV*).

**Scripture:** Mark 16:1-8

**Song:** “As the Dawn Was Breaking”

As a young parent, I always felt that the best bedtime stories were Bible stories. I would select one to share with my two little girls each evening as I tucked them into bed. On one particular night, after the story of the crucifixion, I also told my girls the story of Christ’s resurrection. Dramatically, I described the great earthquake, the angel rolling the stone away, and Jesus coming out of the tomb. Suddenly, both girls burst out in applause, smiling from ear to ear in amazement!

The women who came to the empty tomb were amazed as well. They had come mourning, having seen Christ crucified just three days prior. Their biggest concern was how to roll the great stone away from the tomb to anoint the body. One can only imagine the elation they felt upon seeing the tombstone rolled away and hearing the angel’s announcement that Jesus had risen!

Each year we celebrate Christ’s resurrection at Easter. Yet we might not have all the amazement we had upon hearing about the empty tomb the first time. As Easter approaches, let’s contemplate Jesus’ terrible crucifixion, remember His sobering burial in the tomb, and be amazed once again by His triumphant rising!

**Dear Lord,** help us to be in awe once again at Your resurrection from the dead. Through the power of Your name, amen.

## Divine Redirection

**The Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do** (Acts 9:6, *KJV*).

**Scripture:** Acts 9:1-9

**Song:** “If You Will Only Let God Guide You”

In an incredible turn of events, the “White House Hatchet Man” faced being cut down to size himself—and faced going to prison. Charles Colson, Special Counsel to President Nixon, was embroiled in the Watergate scandal and faced an uncertain future. Education, influence, and a reputation for ruthlessly attacking enemies had also left Colson empty. Just then a friend gave him C. S. Lewis’ *Mere Christianity*, a book that confronted Colson with his sinful nature and need for redemption. Colson accepted Christ, and God used the Watergate crisis to redirect him to begin a prison ministry that has reached countless souls for Christ.

Like Colson, Saul of Tarsus spent years pursuing the wrong things. His pedigree, great education, and reputation for ruthlessly attacking Christians led him far from God. But on one of Saul’s quests to arrest believers, he was stopped by a vision of Jesus Christ himself and was brought face-to-face with his own sin and misdirected life. After trusting Christ, Saul (later called Paul), followed God’s redirection, becoming the greatest missionary of all time.

Regardless of our education, background, or effectiveness, crisis situations will come, and God often uses such life-shattering events to get our attention and redirect us for His purpose. As He does, He will draw us to himself and prepare us for His service.

**Dear Lord,** help us yield to Your redirection in our lives. In Your name, amen.

April 8

## A Greater Power

**For if by one man's offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ (Romans 5:17, *KJV*).**

**Scripture:** Romans 5:12-17

**Song:** "Rejoice! Rejoice!"

In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the White Witch cited a form of magic—the law of Narnia—as a right to take Aslan's life in exchange for the traitor Edmund's. After the witch killed Aslan at the Stone Table, Susan and Lucy mourned. But suddenly, the table split in two, and Aslan appeared alive! The mighty lion explained that although the witch worked evil from her power, there was a deeper magic even more powerful that brought Aslan back to life.

Adam's disobedience infected him with a sinful nature, resulting in both spiritual and physical death. Ever since, sin's power is so great that it passes to every soul born. Yet God in His grace sent Christ to redeem mankind, offering eternal life and eventual resurrection. Just as one man, Adam, brought doom to the world, the God-man, Christ Jesus, brought redemption to the world. The power of sin is no match for the strength of God's redemptive power.

Because of Adam's sin, we were all born spiritually dead, and physical death is appointed to us all. But because of Christ, our souls can be saved and we can be redeemed. We should rejoice in the power of God, which gives us a new heart now and eternal life in Heaven.

**Dear Lord,** thank You that Your power is greater than the power of sin. In our Savior's name, amen.

## Watching for Christ's Return

**The dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words** (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18, *KJV*).

**Scripture:** 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

**Song:** "Return, O God of Love"

"Papa! Papa!" I heard my 7-year-old yelling from the porch. I live very close to my work, and I usually walk there in the morning and home again at the end of the day. My daughter had seen me through the window and came out to meet me with a smile. I was happy to know she was watching for me and was glad to see me return.

When the apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonian believers about Jesus' return, he was writing to a church suffering persecution. Paul wanted to comfort the Thessalonians by not only assuring them that Christ was coming for them but also by the fact that those who had already died in the faith would not miss out; they would be raised to meet the Lord in the air as well. The event was not intended to be an occasion to fear but one that Paul wanted the believers to look forward to.

Today some Christians react to this "end of the world" subject with trepidation. However, the Scriptures describing Christ's coming for His church should not alarm us but excite us. Just as a child waiting for a beloved parent, we should watch for Christ's return and welcome Him with gladness.

**Dear Lord,** help us to look forward to Your return. In Your name, amen.



## Righting Every Wrong

**Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power** (1 Corinthians 15:24, *KJV*).

**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 15:24-29

**Song:** “With the Sound of Trumpets”

In his autobiographical “A Kind of Murder,” author Hugh Pentecost described his rowdy classmates at a boys’ military academy, who gave a frightened new teacher a rough time. At one point in the story, the students disrupted the class by casting handfuls of torn paper into the air, belching loudly, and waving handkerchiefs around—to the horror of the intimidated teacher. During this bedlam, the headmaster marched into the room, and the boys instantly froze, paralyzed with fear. Their antics were quickly ended by a man of true authority.

Corinth was a large city that bred sensuality and deviance. No doubt the Christians in Corinth became discouraged with the evil around them. But Paul wrote that the corruption around them was only temporary. Christ would come again and end the reign of wrongdoers. Christ’s authority would stop the evil, and He would set up His glorious, righteous kingdom.

Like Corinth, our modern world is saturated with debauchery and decadence. However, evildoers and their evil practices are only temporary. When Christ returns, He will stop this world’s evil and set all things right. We can trust that He will bring all present powers under His authority.

**Dear Lord,** help us to remember that one day You will put an end to evil and will establish righteousness. Amen.

## Corruption to Incorruption

**Death is swallowed up in victory** (1 Corinthians 15:54, *KJV*).

**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 15:50-58

**Song:** “Rise from Your Graves, Ye Dead”

In *The Hiding Place*, Corrie ten Boom recalled her harrowing experience in a Nazi concentration camp. Corrie’s sister, Betsy, knew the end of World War II would eventually come, and she dreamed of opening a rehabilitation home for people whose lives had been destroyed by the war. Although Betsy died in the camp, at end of the war Corrie was approached by the director of a relief organization in Germany and asked about beginning just such a work. The building for the home had already been secured—a former concentration camp. A place once used for dark, evil purposes would now shine with the light of Christ. Where there had been torture, there would be healing.

The apostle Paul reminded the Corinthian believers that their service to God was not in vain. Although death and decay were all around, that was not the end for Christians. Christ would return, and believers’ bodies would be changed in a moment—the corruption of their flesh would be changed into the incorruption of glorious new bodies. Paul wanted this to be a motivation for the Corinthians to continue faithfully serving the Lord.

Today we see the same human decay as in the first century. Sickness, weakness, and death take hold of everyone eventually. But we can trust that when Christ returns, He will transform our corrupted mortal bodies into glorious immortal ones. This gives us motivation to serve Christ and look for His appearing.

**Dear Lord,** thank You for reminding us that You will one day change our corrupted bodies into glorious ones. By the hope we have in You, amen.

## Real Resurrection

**Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first-fruits of them that slept** (1 Corinthians 15:20, *KJV*).

**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 12-14, 20-23, 42-45

**Song:** “The Day of Resurrection”

“One man’s junk is another man’s treasure” was never truer than for Michael Sparks. Sparks was garage-sale shopping and paid around \$2 for what he believed was a cheap, mass copy of the Declaration of Independence. However, after much research, he discovered that his document was a rare reprint of the original Declaration and worth over \$400,000! Even though Sparks had originally dismissed the document as not authentic, it was a genuine treasure.

Some in the Corinthian church were spreading the heresy that there is no bodily resurrection. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul denounced this false idea. He asserted that if there is no resurrection, then Christ could not have been raised, Christians’ faith would therefore be in vain, and they would still be dead in their sins. Paul emphasized that Christianity was not simply an idea but a reality. God had redeemed believers’ souls and would one day redeem their fleshly bodies as well. The resurrection was genuine, regardless of what false teachers said.

Likewise, there are many in the world today who deny the reality of the coming resurrection. Yet if a resurrection for believers is not possible, then Christ could not have been resurrected either. In fact, Paul describes Christ as the “firstfruits” of the resurrection. Because He was resurrected, we will be resurrected one day as well.

**Dear Lord,** help us trust that because You were resurrected, we will be resurrected as well someday. In our risen Savior’s name, amen.

## Standing Upright

**The royal officials at the king's gate asked Mordecai, "Why do you disobey the king's command?" (Esther 3:3).**

**Scripture:** Esther 3:1-6

**Song:** "Stand Up"

A friend had wisely counseled me when I moved into private-school administration that the position would bring me a wider view of human brokenness. In that role I frequently mediated conflicts between individuals. Still, I was occasionally surprised by those whose perspective of justice was skewed by their own desires. A demand for what we perceive to be our rights is, at times, self-promotion or self-protection cloaked in sinful indignation.

Just as Mordecai did with Haman, we must remain steadfast in anchoring our perspective of justice in God's definition of right, and not our own, when we experience conflict or face difficult experiences. Keeping our eyes centered on the one who stands above all other authority enables us to remain humble, even when confronting the evil created by the kingdom of darkness.

Haman perceived Mordecai's disobedience as a personal affront to his delegated authority, as if Mordecai's refusal was his own claim to authority. For Mordecai, however, refusing to kneel was a declaration that God alone is the supreme authority and only He is worthy of worship. Mordecai appealed to an unseen kingdom and to the God whose justice he was confident would prevail.

**Father,** thank You that we can ask for Your discernment, that we might see beyond our circumstances to stand firmly on the truth of Your eternal kingdom. By Christ's authority we pray. Amen.

## For Our Good

**The king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews** (Esther 3:10).

**Scripture:** Esther 3:7-11

**Song:** “No Outsiders”

Writer Flannery O'Connor didn't always feel welcome in the South, though it had been her home for most of her life. Devout in her faith, she boldly called out religious form that lacked the fervor of devotion, especially as it related to racism. Her unique style often left her insights about grace misunderstood. Some even went so far as to declare her an outsider to the community of faith.

O'Connor's story reminds us that our sense of purpose, our value in existing, cannot be based on others' opinions. Sometimes we encounter a “Haman”—as in someone who overtly seeks to create chaos in our lives. Equally destructive, however, are those who simply see us as not worth their time.

Haman's request to annihilate the Jews brought about a perplexing response from King Xerxes. The king gave Haman permission, but not because of the money Haman had promised (since Xerxes told Haman to keep his payment). Instead, King Xerxes simply seemed uninterested, without concern for the fate of an entire group of people living in his territory. God, however, continued to work on their behalf.

We too can know that when others are dismissive of or unconcerned for us, God hears our cries and answers for our good.

**Father,** remind us that You hear us. Keep us from lacking interest in the heartfelt concerns of others. In Jesus' name, amen.

## Consistent Hope

**Haman went out that day happy and in high spirits. But when he saw Mordecai at the king's gate and observed that he neither rose nor showed fear in his presence, he was filled with rage against Mordecai (Esther 5:9).**

**Scripture:** Esther 5:9-14

**Song:** “Desert Song”

The early-twentieth-century race to the South Pole between Robert Scott and Roald Amundsen demonstrates the power of consistency. Though not the favored team, Amundsen and his men reached their destination by maintaining a 20-mile pace each day, regardless of the elements. But Scott and his men allowed the environment to dictate their daily treks—and ultimately perished because of that decision.

Like an explorer gauging his effort based on weather and changing variables, we face the temptation to allow our hope, and our emotions, to rise and fall based on what happens around us. When events appear to be in our favor, we find it easier to believe all will be well, but an unexpected frustration can just as quickly send us on a course of despair.

Haman's emotions catapulted into rage when he didn't get his way, but Mordecai remained consistent in his hope, despite Haman's threats. One lived by what could only be temporary, while the other fixed his eyes on the one who is eternal. When times of testing come, God's Word and His character determine the direction and guidelines for our actions and emotions.

**Father,** we praise You for Your character that does not change, and that no matter what transpires in our lives, You can be trusted. Teach us to keep our hope rooted in You. In Jesus' name, amen.

## Asking Without Fear

**Then the king extended the gold scepter to Esther and she arose and stood before him** (Esther 8:4).

**Scripture:** Esther 8:3-8, 16, 17

**Song:** “Salvation Belongs to Our God”

When we were kids, my sister and I would strategize when it came to asking our parents for permission regarding anything significant. Working together, we would first try to figure out which of the two of us had a better chance of securing the desired answer. Then we would decide which parent seemed more likely to be on our side. Inevitably, our parents saw through our tactics; and their teamwork, rather than ours, usually prevailed.

In a scene more significant than childhood antics, Esther carefully discerned her interactions with King Xerxes before making her appeal. She had seen God work in her previous requests, but asking for Xerxes to counter his own ruling was laden with even more political import than his decision to punish Haman. Because she knew that God gave her influence, Esther looked past any fear of danger and interceded boldly for her people.

Esther knew her position in the palace would not exempt her from the precarious situation threatening the Jews’ well-being. She could feel their crisis as she too was at risk. Like Esther, we are called to use the influence God has given us to act with His heart of love on behalf of those around us, feeling what they feel, wherever we may be.

**Father,** thank You for making a way through the blood of Jesus for us to come without fear into Your presence. May we be faithful to intercede for others with our prayers, our words, and our decisions. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## God Sets Us Free

**The Jews agreed to continue the celebration they had begun, doing what Mordecai had written to them** (Esther 9:23).

**Scripture:** Esther 9:18-23, 29-32

**Song:** “Burn the Ships”

As church planters, my husband and I have faced varying challenges, from financial stretch to difficult relationships to ordinary fatigue. In times of struggle, we have been deliberate not only to be honest with others but also to recount, as many times as we needed, the testimonies of God’s faithfulness to us.

Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews living in Persia petitioned God for justice by fasting when their enemies planned to destroy them. God answered with miraculous intervention through His servants. There are no direct references to the name of God in the book of Esther, but we clearly see His deliverance for the Jews because “righteousness and justice are the foundation of [His] throne” (Psalm 89:14). Their intended-but-prevented demise became not only a testimony of preservation but also a celebration to be marked through the generations.

When we feel vulnerable because of the challenges we face, God is always present with us. Whether we feel as if we are captive and out of control in a foreign land or struggling with the consequences of our own choices, we can set our hearts on this truth: God never fails. He will prevail with justice and deliverance for all who seek Him.

**Jesus,** thank You that we can trust You, no matter how fierce the battle we face. Thank You that we can find safety, great joy, and provision when we seek Your name above everything else. Teach us to live completely invested in You and Your ways. With Your authority, we pray. Amen.



## Beyond Our Story

**All [the king's] acts of power and might, together with a full account of the greatness of Mordecai, whom the king had promoted, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Media and Persia? (Esther 10:2).**

**Scripture:** Esther 10:1-3

**Song:** “Our God Reigns”

Going to lunch together after working on a project at the church, my husband and I had a chance to spend time talking with one of the high school students in our congregation. We asked him about his future dreams. Like many his age, he sees the glamour of social media and questions his ability to accomplish what he defines as significant.

We live in a noisy world, one in which people desperately cry out to know their lives are more than a blip on the radar of time. In everything from Instagram posts to YouTube videos, people are desperate for an audience.

A previously unknown man, Mordecai, became so influential that his days were recorded in “the annals of the kings of Media and Persia.” His journey began with his willingness to love well the orphaned relative left in his care. He made history one faithful choice at a time.

When we remember that God exists above time and beyond mankind’s accomplishments, our ordinary moments and day-to-day choices become opportunities for history to shift.

**Jesus,** remind us that living out step-by-step obedience is a powerful rendering of Your kingdom here on earth. May Your will be accomplished in our day-to-day decisions. We pray this by Your authority. Amen.

## Right Before His Eyes

**They impaled Haman on the pole he had set up for Mordecai. Then the king's fury subsided** (Esther 7:10).

**Scripture:** Esther 7:1-10

**Song:** “Unchanging God”

*Cry, the Beloved Country*, written by Alan Paton, chronicles the lives of two fathers in South Africa during the time of apartheid. Wrestling with their personal heartache, the men must also grapple with the greater sins found wherever injustice reigns—the desire for power, the inclination to overlook others’ suffering, and the temptation toward bitterness.

Like Paton’s characters, we struggle to see how justice and mercy work together. How can we, with our personal pain and limited view, begin to express to those around us what seems at times incomprehensible? In its simplest explanation, the justice of God is the setting right of all that He created to be true and good. It is the restoration of right—by His definition—through the working together of many lives, and not just our own.

The book of Esther reminds us that the dedication of a God-fearing man, the timely voice of a eunuch, the appeal of a prayerful queen, and the decree of a secular king were knit together by our sovereign God. While our part of the story might feel incomplete, we must be faithful to represent His truth as best we can. And when we don’t understand, we must trust that almighty God will make everything right in His time.

**Father**, we so easily see with our human perspective, but we know You are perfect in all Your ways. Equip us to reveal Your justice and mercy in the world around us. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

April 20

## Evident Love

**The woman whose son was alive was deeply moved out of love for her son** (1 Kings 3:26).

**Scripture:** 1 Kings 3:16-28

**Song:** “Love Lifted Me”

In graduate school, I made what was to me a large deposit into my checking account—about two and one-half month’s salary at the time. A couple of days went by, but the money had still not reflected in my balance. When I followed up, the bank had no record of my deposit. My tiny receipt from the teller was the only proof I had—the difference between justice and losing it all.

Faced with losing her child or watching him die, the prostitute who stood before Solomon desperately needed justice. She had no evidence or witness; and once Solomon ordered the baby killed, there was seemingly no hope for her case. But the king, freshly gifted with godly wisdom, found the proof he needed in the woman’s love for her son.

Love is still our Father’s favorite instrument to bring justice to our lives. Our case before we accept Him is no more hopeful than that of the prostitute. And yet He gave us Jesus, who provides and helps us lay claim to His salvation. May we in turn be deeply moved to daily live out a love for Him that is evident in all we do.

**Heavenly Father,** thank You for bringing hope to my case. May my love for Jesus be evident to all. In His name, amen.

## Unfettered Focus

**“He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18, 19).**

**Scripture:** Luke 4:14-21

**Song:** “We’ll Work Till Jesus Comes”

In prepping for his first triathlon, my husband learned of all the logistics involved in such a race. To avoid a comedy show of swimmers in helmets and runners limping along in awkwardly angled cycling shoes, athletes place gear for each sport at transition points prior to the race. There is a plan. There is order. Each phase must be completed, but competitors can only focus on one at a time.

Jesus announced His identity in Nazareth by reading Isaiah’s prophecy and declaring it fulfilled. Oddly to us, Jesus stopped mid-sentence as He read the scroll—then rolled it up and handed it back to the attendant. The continuation (from Isaiah 61:2) would have read: “to proclaim . . . the day of vengeance of our God . . .”

Jesus did not make the omission because it wasn’t His role. He made the omission because it wasn’t His role yet. Jesus was keenly focused on who the Father needed Him to be at that time—one who would connect with the broken and bring hope to their lives. Whatever role God hands us, we need the same Spirit-enabled focus. Life serves up plenty of obstacles and distractions, but in resolving to serve with clarity we can together efficiently further the work of the kingdom.

**Heavenly Father,** I’m willing to serve wherever You need me to serve today. Please empower me to be fully focused in that work. In Christ, amen.

## More Than Fair

**“Do not take advantage of each other, but fear your God. I am the LORD your God”** (Leviticus 25:17).

**Scripture:** Leviticus 25:8-17

**Song:** “How Sweet, How Heavenly”

“Double bounce!” my daughter’s friend and favorite tennis opponent shouted after returning a barely missed ball from her side of the court. This fun-loving member of my daughter’s tennis league is as honest as the day is long. Calling your own lines and keeping your own score is a lot of responsibility and power for young kids who want a victory. Honesty always lends to a fair match.

The freedom to enjoy something comes in part from knowing it was a fair process. God instructed the Jews to prorate their land when buying and selling leases to each other, based on how much time was left before the property would revert back to the original owner in the Year of Jubilee (v. 15). It had to be a fair process, or the joy of the Jubilee would be robbed by resentment of at least one party of the transaction.

God wants us, as bearers of His name, to give each other a fair process. When something is fair, it is neutral, devoid of advantage, and relies on truth. It serves both parties equally. When we bring truthfulness to our financial, social, and even spiritual interactions, we partner with the Father in delivering the long-term joy of untainted blessings to the lives of others, as well as to our own.

**Heavenly Father,** help me to be fair in all my dealings. May I always serve as an usher for the joy of Your blessings. In Christ, amen.

## Pursued

**“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6).**

**Scripture:** Isaiah 49:1-7

**Song:** “Just as I Am”

My sister-in-law, Sarah, once offered to babysit 3-year-old triplets and their 2-year-old brother. After the adventure that was dinner came the battle that was bedtime. As Sarah tucked one child in, another climbed out of the covers. Resettling the roamer only queued the next kid. It was like a never-ending game of arcade whack-a-mole, with one child hopping up after another was back in bed.

In the second half of the eighth century BC, Israel itself had become quite a handful. Following rebellion, warnings had proven fruitless; and many of the Jewish tribes were scattered, living in exile or captivity. But the Father hints through Isaiah (for the second time) of a Savior who was coming to gather them back home. He would restore them as a people. And He would extend salvation to all.

While caring for a fickle flock, this Light would tirelessly seek to add to His number. And add He did. To Him, you and I—many generations later—are still worth the work. If we reflect on our lives, we can see all He has invested in us—at times in vain. And yet He still reaches for us daily while adding others. May His praiseworthy pursuit bring change to our priorities today.

**Heavenly Father,** let all You have invested in me yield a pleasing return. In Christ, amen.

## Restored for a Reason

**They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations (Isaiah 61:4).**

**Scripture:** Isaiah 61:1-7

**Song:** “Rescue the Perishing”

A shell of a house sits abandoned just blocks from Mobile Bay. Remnants of the roof peek out from a faded and tattered tarp like the hollow eyes of a person ready to succumb to illness. Memories once made between the now kudzu-wrapped walls were exhaled years ago when hurricane-force winds pressed down on the building’s chest. The world sees loss, but our rebuilders sees opportunity.

Through Isaiah, Jesus paints the picture of His coming and His plan to pull sinners from the darkness—and to slowly, lovingly restore them to a splendor that is reflective of His own. This language of renewal spoke to the Jews who would return from Babylon to the ruins of their past, but it was also a nod to the gospel-era believers who, after their own restoration, would build the church by teaching the lost, the deserted, and those broken by this world.

Never intending us to serve as staged but untouched model homes, Jesus restored our dilapidated hearts for residency. We are put to use primarily to introduce others to the Lord, the host of our hearts. It’s hard to justify our continued tenure on earth for any other reason after committing to Him. We remain here, as His hands and feet, to build His kingdom out of worldly ruins. We are here because we have work to do.

**Heavenly Father,** thank You for restoring me. Open my eyes to the broken and help me pour into them the gospel of Your love. In Christ, amen.

## When Captivity Gets Comfortable

**Pass through, pass through the gates! Prepare the way for the people. Build up, build up the highway! Remove the stones** (Isaiah 62:10).

**Scripture:** Isaiah 62:5-12

**Song:** “Higher Ground”

As a pup, our dog Amos had to be crated when we were out of the house. Otherwise he’d make a meal of furniture, blankets, anything he could; and so, endangering himself. It’s been years since he had to be crated, but every time we are about to leave, he’ll go sit where his crate used to be. Sometimes he’s still there hours later when we return. Obviously, his limits grew comfortable.

As I envision the excitement the Israelites had at the news of freedom, I also imagine some doubt, some fear of the obstacles and time involved in obtaining that freedom—and just the plain comfort of what they had come to know, regardless of how problematic those circumstances were. When Isaiah emphatically commanded them to leave Babylon, to leave the captivity, we can assume it was necessary to prepare them for the task.

God still has to give me “pass through” commands today. Sometimes change, even change for the better, is daunting. We might be called to grow out of a comfort zone, take on a new ministry, or break free from a sin that’s currently enslaving us. There might be work involved or a “highway” we have to build to make the journey. But when God has made clear His plan for our lives, we have to trust and “pass through” if we want the blessings He has in store.

**Heavenly Father,** give me the courage to make the changes You place on my heart. In Christ, amen.



## A Powerful Proclamation

**You will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow** (Isaiah 62:2).

**Scripture:** Isaiah 61:8-11; 62:2-4a

**Song:** “How Great Thou Art”

Charles Colchester, a self-proclaimed psychic, warned of Abraham Lincoln’s assassination weeks in advance. This dubious character once close to Mary Todd had attempted to blackmail her and no longer had influence with the family when he delivered the message. And because of his friendship with John Wilkes Booth, the true source of his warning has always been questioned. Regardless of his associations and crooked past, he called it right. Had he been heard, he would’ve changed history.

Words are powerful, but their power is contingent on the credentials of the one who speaks them. When God sent the message to the Israelites that He would change their name from deserted to delight, from desolate to married, that message had weight. Weight not from human discussion and decision but from the intrinsic power of the Lord himself. The Lord has a résumé of spoken creation that contains so much—from vast galaxies to single-cell organisms. There is no mouth more powerful.

This God of ours who whispers worlds into existence does not misspeak, and the size of His word is matched only by His love for us. When He calls us forgiven, we are in that moment none of what we used to be and everything He says we are. May we never let His mighty voice grow small in our noisy lives, and may we always humbly bask in His massive love.

**Heavenly Father,** let the immeasurable weight of Your words forever be impressed on my heart. In Christ’s name, amen.

## God Can Reach Everywhere

**Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back** (Deuteronomy 30:4).

**Scripture:** Deuteronomy 30:1-6

**Song:** “Jesus Loves Even Me”

Years ago people would seal a message in a bottle, with a note saying something like, “Send me a postcard from where you found this bottle.” Then they’d put the bottle into the water. Most bottles were lost forever, but some were found. In a few cases, the bottles had traveled the ocean currents around the world!

Israel had been scattered throughout the world due to the people’s sin. But paired with God’s promised curses for disobedience, God always promises restoration. When Israel repented, God began to bring them back.

We may find ourselves far from God at some point in our lives. Once we return to Him with our hearts, God is ready to restore our relationship with Him. There is no place that is too far away from redemption. We have two lessons of hope. First, there is nowhere we can go that God cannot find us, unlike the bottles that get lost. Second, while people may ignore the message in a bottle, God will neither forget nor ignore us. He is always ready to bring us home.

**Dear Lord,** thank You for remembering us, and for reaching to the farthest parts of the world to redeem us. In Jesus’ name, amen.

April 28

## Jesus Our Shepherd Brings Us Home

**As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out my sheep, and will deliver them out of all places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day. And I will bring them out from the people, and gather them from the countries** (Ezekiel 34:12, 13, *KJV*).

**Scripture:** Ezekiel 34:11-16

**Song:** “Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us”

In 1991, Israelis were concerned for the safety of Jews in Ethiopia. Because the government was about to be overthrown in a civil war, the nation of Israel gained short-term permission for an emergency airlift of Jews from Ethiopia to Israel. The entire program, called Operation Solomon, rescued 14,000 Jews from danger in 36 hours.

If people in one location can watch over people in another and come to their rescue, just imagine how much our loving God watches over us to rescue us. He seeks us and finds us and brings us into His fold, regardless of how far we might have been scattered. God is continually calling His people into His fold.

God cares for us as our loving shepherd. He ensures that we receive the aid we need, and He guides us in paths of safety and growth. He provides for us in countless ways. God does not neglect any of His children. We can rest secure in knowing that God is looking after us.

**Heavenly Father,** thank You for seeking and finding us, and then bringing us into Your fold. May we always be grateful for Your provision and rest in the safety of Your arms. In our Savior's name, amen.

## Restored Through Newness in Christ

**“I will strengthen Judah and save the tribes of Joseph. I will restore them because I have compassion on them. They will be as though I had not rejected them, for I am the LORD their God and I will answer them” (Zechariah 10:6).**

**Scripture:** Zechariah 10:6-12

**Song:** “I Shall Be Whiter Than Snow”

“A broken bone grows back stronger.” That old saying has been challenged by some scientists in recent years, scientists who report calcium loss and other factors. But once completely healed, the bone is definitely not weaker than before. It can be completely restored as if there had been no break.

When Zechariah prophesied that God planned to restore Israel, the restoration would be complete. The tribes would be strengthened and returned to their former places as if God had never rejected them.

When God cleanses us from sin and sanctifies us, His restoration is complete. We do not exist as spiritual cripples, carrying the wounds of our sin through eternity. God will restore us to a point where it will be as if there had been no break in our relationship with God. The healing will be complete.

This work is not done based on any merit we may have. It is entirely out of God’s compassion for us. Just as He desired to bring healing and restoration to Israel, His desire in His program of salvation is to bring complete healing and restoration to us today.

**O God in Heaven,** You make us as new, cleansing us completely. We thank You for restoring us and making us whole. In our Savior’s name we pray. Amen.

## Exaltation That Cannot Be Silenced

**God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins (Acts 5:31).**

**Scripture:** Acts 5:27-32

**Song:** “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today”

Disney’s *Aladdin* shows Aladdin as the focal point of a huge parade to impress Princess Jasmine. Led by the genie, there are musicians, dancers, and animals marching in to create a huge spectacle. Aladdin himself, as Prince Ali, rides in exalted on an elephant. But it was all a lie, as Aladdin had done nothing to deserve any exaltation, being merely a street urchin masquerading as a prince.

So much more genuine is the true exaltation that Christ received from the Father because He is Savior! There is no fakery; no deception was needed to puff up Christ. Death could not contain Christ. His resurrection leaves no doubt as to His divinity. The message of subsequent miracles after Christ’s ascension, as well as the testimony of the apostles, could not be silenced by the Jewish council. No one can silence or refute the exaltation of Christ.

The birth, life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus Christ provide full testimony to His supremacy. This is the glorious universal truth that cannot be silenced and will ring forth forever!

**Exalted Lord**, thank You for choosing to die for us. We give You praise for rising again in victory to be exalted at the right hand of God, our Father. We worship You now and forever. In Your mighty name, amen.

## A Long Enough Leash to Sin

**She obeyed not the voice; she received not correction; she trusted not in the LORD; she drew not near to her God** (Zephaniah 3:2, *KJV*).

**Scripture:** Zephaniah 3:1-7

**Song:** “I Gave My Life for Thee”

Dogs must be stubborn creatures. There are myriads of training videos, books, and classes designed to help desperate owners teach their pets to heed and heel. If one method fails, the owners frantically move on to the next method “guaranteed” to solve their obedience problems. Sometimes people will just give up.

This dog behavior is not necessarily rebellion. In most cases it is simply dogs being dogs. But humans, having a sinful will, do engage in acts of willful rebellion against God. They reject His counsel, they reject His standards and laws, and they may reject Him altogether.

While God could force us to yield to His commands, love requires that He let us experience the consequences of our rebellion. He sent Israel into exile to understand the results of their rebellion. He allows us to be more distant from Him when our rebellion is demanding more space in which to sin.

Yet unlike with the recalcitrant pet on which the owners eventually give up, God does not give up on us. Even while God knows it is best for us to experience the consequences of our sin, it saddens Him when we reject His fellowship. So He has provided the means to bring us back to Him.

**Heavenly Father,** I know I have sinned. Help me learn from my past rebellious behavior to forsake my sin and turn to You. In Christ’s name I pray. Amen.

May 2

## The Test of Humility

**“I will leave within you the meek and humble. The remnant of Israel will trust in the name of the LORD” (Zephaniah 3:12).**

**Scripture:** Zephaniah 3:8-13

**Song:** “I Surrender All”

In the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Indy had to pass a series of tests to reach the Holy Grail and save his father. The first test was of penitence, which he understood as humility. He then physically knelt, which saved him from the blade whooshing across the entryway. His physical demonstration of humility saved his life, and he was able to continue.

When God restored Israel, He would restore the meek and humble. Those who were arrogant or proud would no longer be with them. Those who were deceitful and boastful would not be saved. The remnant God preserved would in humbleness place their trust in God rather than in their own abilities.

An important facet of God’s plan of restoration is that it is His plan and not ours. We cannot, through our own abilities, save ourselves. Any arrogant boasting of not needing God to take care of us will ultimately be met with judgment.

Thankfully, as God has demonstrated countless times in the Bible, He desires to heal and restore us. He desires to bring us into fellowship with Him due to His great compassion for us. This great love, mercy, and grace should inspire in us a sincere response of humility.

**Dear God,** we know that we could not save ourselves, so we rely completely on You. Help us to remain humble and never think we could reach You through our own strength. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Our Slate Wiped Clean by Christ

**The LORD hath taken away thy judgments, he hath cast out thine enemy: the king of Israel, even the LORD, is in the midst of thee: thou shalt not see evil any more** (Zephaniah 3:15, *KJV*).

**Scripture:** Zephaniah 3:14-20

**Song:** “Jesus Paid It All”

Juvenile criminal records may be removed when the youth reaches adulthood. In many states the juvenile records are either sealed from public view or destroyed altogether. The young adults get a clean record, and past offenses cannot be held against them as they seek employment, schooling, or other opportunities. This is not based on merit; it is entirely an action taken by the state. Individuals can begin a new life without past crimes haunting them.

How much greater is the grace and restoration offered to us by God! Instead of our facing the judgment required by our sin, God has taken it away in Christ. In addition, He has offered us permanent protection from the accuser who would desire to steal back our lives. God provides this for all who have given their lives to Christ. This is nothing we have done; this is entirely the work of God.

We do not need to live in fear or threat of judgment. We can experience true peace with God in Christ now, and our future destiny will be in God’s love. This is a cause for continual celebration and gratitude as we walk in eternal fellowship with God.

**O God in Heaven,** You cleaned our slates and removed our sin. You redeemed us and made us righteous in Christ. Guide us in every step with You. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.



May 4

## Blessing Others

**“I will bless those who bless you, . . . and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you”** (Genesis 12:3).

**Scripture:** Genesis 12:1-8

**Song:** “Mission’s Flame”

A St. John’s University professor and I were talking about ideas similar to the Golden Rule (Luke 6:31). She told me: “Centuries ago, people were taught to care for anyone within a distance of 30 minutes. That was understood as the 200 houses closest to yours. Now a jet can travel 250, 350, even 450 miles in that time. What’s more, mobile phones have swept across the world. We now can reach people almost anywhere on earth. Do you know what I think? It’s time to change our thinking again.”

Like the patriarch Abraham, we of faith are called by God to bless all peoples. It all starts by hearing God’s call on our lives and saying yes to Him. Once we receive the Lord’s rich blessings, then it’s our privilege to bless others.

We can bless others in a plethora of ways. Those ways include our smiles, our greetings, our friendliness, our friendships, our listening ears, and our empathetic hearts. More ways include winsomely sharing Scripture verses, loving and living by biblical principles, and speaking gracious words of truth. My favorite? Sharing a page from my devotional reading that day.

**Dear Lord,** thank You for the many ways we can bless others. Today please make me a blessing to those I know and meet. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## God Forgives and Forgets

**“I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more”** (Jeremiah 31:34).

**Scripture:** Jeremiah 31:31-34

**Song:** “Mighty to Save”

My longtime mentor and good friend, evangelist Luis Palau, had just finished speaking in Chicago when a retired university professor, age 77, slowly shuffled up to him. Luis asked him, “Do you have eternal life, or are you still searching?”

The professor said he’d lost his faith in college. Then he added, “God will never take me back. He can’t. I am so unworthy.”

It was Holy Week, so Luis talked about Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday. Then he said, “Professor, God can take away your guilt. Listen to what God says in the Bible: ‘Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more’” (Hebrews 10:17, paraphrasing Jeremiah 31:34).

The professor said, “That’s beautiful.”

Luis replied, “Are you ready to be received back by God?” He was, so Luis put his arm around this distinguished elderly gentleman and prayed with him. Afterward, the professor couldn’t stop talking about his joy and relief.

We sometimes forget the life-transforming power of the gospel. It’s truly good news for people of all ages. If you are ready to believe God forgives and forgets, then it’s time to pray.

**Dear Lord,** thank You so much for the reality that You forgive all our sins and remember them no more. Thank You that Jesus paid it all. May I experience the joy of Your salvation again today. Amen.

May 6

## Experiencing True Freedom

**“I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them” (Ezekiel 37:23).**

**Scripture:** Ezekiel 37:15-23

**Song:** “Where the Spirit of the Lord Is”

As a 12-year-old, Jean-Paul Sartre decided to become an atheist so that he could live the rest of his days as he pleased. To seal his decision, Jean-Paul stood before a mirror, stared at his reflection, and then cursed God. Sartre went on to make a name for himself, of course. His political exploits are legendary, and his writings are definitive of mid-twentieth-century atheistic existentialism.

Shortly before his death, however, Sartre relented. The *Nouvel Observateur* records his words: “I do not feel that I am the product of chance, a speck of dust in the universe, but someone who was expected, prepared, prefigured. In short, a being whom only a Creator could put here; and this idea of a creating hand refers to God.” This amazing statement by Sartre later appeared in *National Review*.

I’ve talked with hundreds of people across the US and Canada. I find that many wish, in their heart of hearts, they could believe that God hasn’t given up on them after all. How good, how very good, that the Lord will do whatever is needed to free us from the eternal consequences of the choices in our past! Thanks to His death on the cross, Jesus saves and cleanses us from all sin. As a result, we can experience true freedom, and then start sharing the gospel with others.

**Dear Lord,** thank You that You don’t want anyone to perish, but want all to come to repentance. Even Sartre. Even me. What good news indeed! In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Living at Peace with Others

**If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone** (Romans 12:18).

**Scripture:** Romans 12:9-21

**Song:** “Broken Vessels (Amazing Grace)”

At the request of a major Christian publisher, I served as the executive editor for a study Bible. More than 140 people worked on that project. One day three team members called me, one after another. Each one told me, in so many words, “I’m so angry with you that I won’t speak with you ever again.” Click.

I was baffled. I lined up a mediator, and the three individuals agreed to meet with me in a certain city. That morning the mediator called to say he couldn’t come after all. I panicked. *This could be the worst day of my life*, I thought. I listened to them intently all morning. Before noon, God had bridged the gap and all three reconciled with me. Then we went out to lunch to celebrate. That day we became friends.

What gap do you want God to bridge in your own relationships? It could be to a family member, a neighbor, or a friend. Whoever it is, there is hope. So talk it over with God. Step out in faith and invite the other person to meet with you. Ask for permission to invite a mutual friend to join the two of you. Listen. And don’t forget to celebrate your reconciliation.

**Dear Lord**, thank You for encouraging me to do my best to reconcile with others. You know who I have in mind. Please give me courage to step out in faith today. In Jesus’ name, amen.

May 8

## Sharing God's Goodness with Others

**Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus** (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

**Scripture:** 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22

**Song:** "Good, Good Father"

Sometimes life is hard. Very hard. I should know. Within a six-week period I was hit with a rapid-fire series of crises. My love for God, joy for life, and peace were shattered. In my despair, I doubted God's character. Finally the day came when I couldn't read the Bible anymore. I couldn't pray, even over a meal. Experientially, I had lost my faith. I had let the circumstances of life temporarily overshadow what I knew to be true.

I'm so glad God began renewing my faith when I started taking several small, simple steps of obedience. I forced myself to open my Bible, read a verse, and honestly answer the question, "Do I believe it?" To my surprise, I said yes. It wasn't a big YES! But it was enough to prompt me to feel thankful and hopeful, so I read another verse, and then another. At long last, I felt God speaking through His Word to me again. I started praying to Him, as well. In time, my faith was renewed in a remarkable way.

Since then I've talked with many about my experience. Not because it's dramatic, but because it's true to life. After all, every Christian is tempted, at one time or another, to experientially lose his or her faith. Thankfully, God isn't caught off guard. He isn't shocked or surprised. Instead, He is ready to rebuild our faith. Often it becomes more robust than ever.

**Dear Lord,** thank You that we have the ability to be thankful to You. What a gift! In Your name, amen.

## Don't Live for God Solo

**“The inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, ‘Let us go at once to entreat the LORD and seek the LORD Almighty. I myself am going’” (Zechariah 8:21).**

**Scripture:** Zechariah 8:18-23

**Song:** “Build My Life”

A few months before his death at age 90, best-selling author and Christian statesman Dr. Ted W. Engstrom invited me to fly to Pasadena, California, to spend a day together, just the two of us. His eyesight was gone, but his mind was still sharp. For hours he told me about the things closest to his heart.

Among other things, Dr. Engstrom told me about a pact that he, Billy Graham, and Bill Bright had made decades earlier, before they became famous. “We promised each other that we would finish well,” Dr. Engstrom told me. “And just think—Bill Bright did just that! Billy Graham assures me he’s going to be faithful to the end. And I fully intend to do the same!”

I’ll never forget his smile. Although he had made that promise long ago, keeping it wasn’t a burden. Instead, it seemed to be the secret of his enthusiasm and vitality. I’ve seen athletes flash that same smile after winning a major victory. To see it radiate from someone near the end of life is even more moving.

It’s not enough to have private good intentions. It’s best to make important lifelong decisions together, as a team, with close friends. I’m not just talking about wedding vows, of course. I’m talking about promising to live for God your whole life. Together you can do it!

**Dear Lord,** please give me friends willing to go the distance with me. In Jesus’ name, amen.

May 10

## Experiencing True Awe

**This is what the LORD Almighty says: “It may seem marvelous to the remnant of this people at that time, but will it seem marvelous to me?” (Zechariah 8:6).**

**Scripture:** Zechariah 8:1-8, 11-17

**Song:** “What a Beautiful Name”

When visiting great cities in Europe and Latin America, I haven’t been able to resist walking around and into old cathedrals. The buildings and ornate artwork are designed to provoke a sense of awe at the greatness of God. Yes, I know some wonder how humans could have the audacity to think that God, who is so huge, has penetrated all the enormous galaxies to be near us. Yet our value is not determined by our comparatively small size. For that matter, the entire universe is nothing compared to God. It’s amazing to consider that He is interested in all the small bits. Yet God is indeed mindful of you and me.

From Genesis and Exodus to Zechariah and Malachi, the Old Testament speaks of the Lord God as the Creator of Heaven and Earth. It’s a constant reminder that He can merely speak and accomplish anything He wishes. It’s never complicated or hard for Him. What seems absolutely marvelous to us (like the night sky!) is for the Lord all in a day’s work, so to speak. Then again, there is something that does bring great joy and delight to His heart. And that is when we experience true awe and instantly give God our heartfelt worship and praise.

Don’t wait. Plan new opportunities to feel awe-inspired by creation. Each time, be sure to tell God thanks!

**Dear Lord,** thank You for all You have made. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Prayer Received

**When I am in distress, I call to you, because you answer me** (Psalm 86:7).

**Scripture:** Psalm 86:1-13

**Song:** “What a Friend We Have in Jesus”

I sat in my car around midnight, weeping. “God, I feel so alone. I can’t do this on my own. I’m worried about my kids too.” Eventually, I exited my car to go into my home.

A neighbor pulled up, calling out, “How are you?”

I waved and tossed an “I’m good” over my shoulder. Of course I wasn’t, but I wanted to hide my tears.

She responded, “My sister feels the Holy Spirit is saying you need prayer.”

*Why did God give away my neediness?* I thought, then relented. “Yes, I do.”

Although I hadn’t given them any details, the Spirit led my neighbor and her sister to pray specific Scriptures related to each of the concerns on my mind. I’m certain God heard my cries of despair and responded through my neighbor and her sister.

The psalmist also cried out to God in a time of need, and he too received an answer. Answers don’t necessarily mean changes in our circumstances. They may come in the form of assurances that in the midst of raging storms we’re seen, heard, and surrounded by God’s love and protection. David knew he could rely on God’s faithfulness. We can too.

**Lord,** thank You for always being on our side, hearing our prayers, and providing assurances of Your love and mercy. In Jesus’ name, amen.



## Misplaced Confidence

**“Do not listen to your prophets, your diviners, your interpreters of dreams, your mediums or your sorcerers who tell you, ‘You will not serve the king of Babylon.’ They prophesy lies to you that will only serve to remove you far from your lands; I will banish you and you will perish” (Jeremiah 27:9, 10).**

**Scripture:** Jeremiah 27:1-11

**Song:** “We Trust in the Name of the Lord Our God”

The newly appointed commander of the Army of the Potomac, “Fighting Joe” Hooker, was confident in his advantage. His army was twice the size of the Confederate Army he pursued. He boasted that he would not be deprived of victory over his enemies. At first it appeared his confidence was well-founded, when he gained the initiative in battle. However, leaders of the Southern forces soon discovered that his left flank was vulnerable, and Fighting Joe went down in utter defeat.

Jeremiah warned the warring kings that they would not be able to defeat Nebuchadnezzar. While it defied conventional wartime wisdom, people who would submit would live in peace. However, those who ignored God—to put their confidence in their own abilities and listen to those who claimed to see a different future—all came to ruin.

Sometimes we think we’ve got all the details buttoned down. We place our trust in ourselves and our resources, but lose the battle. When we follow God’s leading, even when it feels counter-intuitive, He will ultimately make us victorious.

**Lord**, please help us not rely on poor counsel or our own strength, but clearly hear Your voice in each decision we make, both large and small. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Letting Go

**I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you (Deuteronomy 30:15, 16).**

**Scripture:** Deuteronomy 30:15-20

**Song:** “Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)”

There are many stories about a man holding a branch jutting out from the side of a cliff. They depict the life-or-death dilemma as the victim calls out for help. One of these stories inserts God as the would-be rescuer, who tells the desperate man to trust Him and let go of the branch. After much thought the victim asks if there is anyone else up there who can help.

We might laugh awkwardly because the story rings true. We call out for help, but expect it to come in a way that we want—at a cost or level of risk that we like.

God is everywhere around us. He is above us when we need to be pulled up, and He is below us when we are falling. He is the only one who can rescue us for eternity. All He asks is that we let go to love and obey Him. Both responses come from trust. When we are hanging on for dear life, our most secure response is to let go and turn to God in obedience, love, and trust.

**Father,** help us walk in obedience, trusting You in both the good and the difficult times, knowing that You desire to bless us in all things. In Jesus' name, amen.

## Listen Up

**Then King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah the prophet and had him brought to the third entrance to the temple of the LORD. “I am going to ask you something,” the king said to Jeremiah. “Do not hide anything from me.” Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “If I give you an answer, will you not kill me? Even if I did give you counsel, you would not listen to me” (Jeremiah 38:14, 15).**

**Scripture:** Jeremiah 38:14-18

**Song:** “Word of God, Speak”

You’ve probably heard the quote, “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results.” Although we don’t like the anticipated outcome, we re-fuse to change our way of thinking, hoping something else in the equation will give way so the bottom line changes.

King Zedekiah was guilty of this when he once again pulled Jeremiah out of prison to ask him for a word from God. He directs Jeremiah not to “hide anything” from him, perhaps hoping for an “out clause” from the earlier prophecy of death. But the prophet has been down this road before with the king—and so responds, “Even if I did give you counsel, you would not listen to me” (v. 15).

There’s wisdom in godly counsel. When we refuse to see harmful things that another points out—a toxic relationship, an all-consuming job, or destructive habits—circumstances can end in tragedy, as they did for King Zedekiah. Tragedy or not, the conclusion to any circumstance outside the will of God is always less than perfect.

**God**, please help us to pay attention to Your voice and turn from harmful ways. In Jesus name, amen.

## The Cost of Noncompliance

**“Inquire now of the LORD for us because Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon is attacking us. Perhaps the LORD will perform wonders for us as in times past so that he will withdraw from us” (Jeremiah 21:2).**

**Scripture:** Jeremiah 21:1-7

**Song:** “If My People Will Pray”

In September 2010, a home in rural Tennessee burned to the ground because the homeowner hadn't paid a 75-dollar fee for fire-fighting services. Desperate as the flames raged, the owner called 911 and offered to pay whatever was necessary, but was told it was too late. When the blaze spread, the fire company responded to save a nearby home. That homeowner had paid the fee. The mayor said the fire department couldn't let homeowners pay the fee on the spot because the only payees would be those whose homes were actually on fire at the moment.

In this passage, the kingdom of Judah was in a similarly desperate situation. Nebuchadnezzar was attacking, and those who sought out Jeremiah hoped he'd speak to God on their behalf. But the “firefighting fee” hadn't been paid by the current inhabitants of Judah. They were desperate, but there had been no repentance or obedience, as in their forefather's day, to reverse the sentence.

We can't rely on the relationship others have with God to see us out of desperate times. We need to establish our own relationship with Him. Thankfully, unlike that Tennessee mayor, God is willing to accept our confession of sin anytime from a truly repentant heart.

**Lord,** thank You for wanting relationship with us and for hearing our prayers of true repentance. In Your name, amen.

## The Enemy Within

**Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon. . . . The Babylonian army pursued the king and overtook him in the plains of Jericho. All his soldiers were separated from him and scattered, and he was captured (2 Kings 24:20b; 25:5, 6).**

**Scripture:** 2 Kings 24:20b–25:7

**Song:** “God’s Way Is Best”

Charles Spurgeon said, “The greatest enemy to human souls is the self-righteous spirit which makes men look to themselves for salvation.”

King Zedekiah tried everything but looking to the Lord for help in his circumstances. While he went through the motions of seeking a word from God, he had no intention of complying. Instead, he believed the yes-men prophets and threw the truth-telling Jeremiah into prison. Zedekiah rebelled against Babylon’s King Nebuchadnezzar, then tried to outlast a siege, and finally used his army to attempt escape. Nothing worked. Zedekiah’s self-righteous spirit refused to be humbled of its own accord, and in the end he was humiliated and tortured in the worst way.

It’s a losing battle when we try to “work things out” on our own. When God says to surrender, then yield. Rebellion won’t work. Worldly counsel won’t work. Holding out hope that He’ll change His mind won’t work. There’s nowhere to hide from His omnipresence.

Today let us recognize that our sole source of salvation is found in God. Replace the self-righteous self-talk with humble submission to the lover of our souls. He alone can forgive our missteps and poor choices and redeem them for a victorious life.

**Father,** thank You for Your willingness to redeem our hardened hearts when we humbly submit to Your grace and mercy. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Choose Wisely

**“Tell the people, ‘This is what the LORD says: See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death. Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague. But whoever goes out and surrenders to the Babylonians who are besieging you will live; they will escape with their lives’”** (Jeremiah 21:8, 9).

**Scripture:** Jeremiah 21:8-14

**Song:** “It’s Your Life”

Each day we make decisions. Some are less consequential, while others can be life-altering. While simple choices are often made without much thought, we tend to agonize over those things with deeper implications. It is as if we need to figure out which bridges to cross and which bridges we should burn.

The people of Judah had a choice. The decision would be life-altering for them. Stay put in their city and face certain death—whether by the sword of the Babylonians, starvation, or horrible disease—or surrender to the cruel Babylonians and escape with their lives but not much more. Speaking through Jeremiah, God could not have made the choice more clear. Life or death.

Thousands of years later, we read these words and think, *This decision would be simple! Surrender and live!* But the people of Judah had strayed so far from God that even with the consequences spelled out, they refused to surrender their will and accept life. As you face choices today, seek God’s leading through prayer and His Word. Listen for His voice, then choose wisely. Choose life.

**Father,** thank You for Your wisdom and instruction that You make available to us so that we aren’t left to make decisions on our own. Help us surrender and live. Amen.

## Expressing Christ's Care

**Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge** (Deuteronomy 24:17).

**Scripture:** Deuteronomy 24:17-22

**Song:** “Make Me a Blessing”

As I read the newspaper, log in to social media, and watch the evening news, I realize that social injustices surround me: homelessness, poverty, lack of food and clean water, unequal wealth distribution . . . The list seems endless. Sometimes I feel overwhelmed. It appears that the world has forgotten (if it ever knew) how to care for the needy, the destitute, and the deprived.

The focus of such inequities in today's reading is the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow. Throughout the Old Testament, God cared for these people in a special way. What I take from today's reading is simple: let those in need benefit from my abundance. Nothing tricky in those instructions. Nothing beyond the ability of most human beings. My wife's Bible study decided that they need to do more than read and learn. They now collect groceries for a local food pantry.

We use words to tell of Jesus' victory over sin and death. We express this in our actions as we care for people around us. I can help them with what I have. Share the wealth God graciously pours out on you. God wants us to treat people with respect and to see that they encounter the justice that comes from knowing Jesus.

**Loving God,** You placed me in a position to care for others. Shape my heart to reach out to those who need Christ's care. In His name, amen.

## Lighting the Way

**He is to read [the law] all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD** (Deuteronomy 17:19).

**Scripture:** Deuteronomy 17:18-20

**Song:** “More About Jesus Would I Know”

As I entered the library, I thought about the many times I had previously utilized the service to get a novel, a travel book to plan a vacation, or a book recommended as a must-read. Recently, I’ve discovered the ease of checking out an e-book, never entering the brick-and-mortar building. Some books opened new worlds to me, others made me think deeply, and biographies inspired me. I thought about hundreds of available books and the knowledge I gained in reading.

God’s instructions to the Israelites were to appoint a king who would fear God and observe His laws. The king would make wise decisions by reading the laws daily. The king’s strength was not in wealth or political alliances, but in God’s Word. It would be an anchor in stormy times. It would sustain the king and keep the kingdom residents on the course that God planned for them.

I thank God for libraries and the knowledge they provide. I am more thankful to God for His holy Word that is a lamp guiding my way through life. One of the rewards of regular Bible study is that slowly, and sometimes without my awareness, the printed text of Scripture becomes part of me—fixed in memory, filling my subconscious with the wisdom and teaching of God. Slowly the truths of God are hidden in my heart.

**God of wisdom**, thank You for lighting my way with Your Word. In my Savior’s name, amen.



May 20

## Entering God's Presence

**He who does these things will never be shaken** (Psalm 15:5).

**Scripture:** Psalm 15

**Song:** “Blest Are the Pure in Heart”

When I enter the airport to leave Louisville for some distant destination, I must first pass through the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) gate. I present my airline boarding pass and my driver's license or passport to the agent sitting at the entry. He looks at me, then looks at the photo on the document, and then looks at me again. Maybe he's checking the color of my eyes or the gray hair on my head that was a bit darker when the picture was taken. He gives me a nod, says “Have a nice day,” and motions me to proceed. Once I have passed scrutiny, I may enter the concourse and proceed to my flight gate.

Picture yourself as a pilgrim arriving at the Old Testament temple of the Lord, preparing to enter. You ask the question: “Who may enter here?” The answer is not bound to physical attributes—your height or the color of your hair and eyes. Rather, the response describes the life lived by the believer: those who walk blamelessly, those who speak truthfully, those who wrong no one, and those who give graciously.

To be all those things all the time is impossible, but they give me a helpful model—four specific reminders of how to act in almost any situation. If I can aim for these standards when under pressure, a stranger might guess that I am a Christian.

**Lord,** strengthen me to be more like You and model Your love for others. Amen.

## Deadwood

**“Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness”**  
(Jeremiah 22:13).

**Scripture:** Jeremiah 22:11-19

**Song:** “Take My Life and Let It Be”

I watched from my kitchen window as a group of tree trimmers gathered in my neighbors’ driveway and my driveway to scrutinize my neighbors’ large oak tree. For a year, the dead branches of their tree have overhung my driveway, and deadwood from that tree has dropped onto my yard. The dead limbs were dangerous, and they were ugly. But within a few hours, the deadwood from throughout the tree had been cut and run through the chipper, the truck was gone, and the beautiful autumn leaves had burst forth!

Jeremiah condemned King Jehoiakim for the “deadwood” that filled his life. The king of Judah had entrenched himself among his possessions in his lavish multi-room palace. The life of Jehoiakim appeared perfect as he tried to project an aura of stability and financial means. Sadly, he defined his life and his worth by treasures gained from injustices to his people.

We are always in danger of being governed by our life-robbing possessions. Today, begin an exercise in trust by getting rid of the deadwood and allowing the richer colors of life to be seen in your world. Today, try to abandon those things in your life that really hold no value or don’t promise a richer life for you or for those who may be blessed by your abundance.

**Lord,** help me never to be so concerned with the things of this world that I neglect to reach out to those who are in need. In Your name I pray. Amen.

May 22

## Danger Warning

**“You have not obeyed me”** (Jeremiah 22:21).

**Scripture:** Jeremiah 22:20-23

**Song:** “Prepare to Meet Thy God”

My daughter is a hiker. Whenever possible, she and friends depart their homes in Portland, Oregon, for long drives that terminate at mountains in Oregon, Washington, and occasionally Canada. The natural beauty of these God-created destinations calls them over and over. Usually there are pictures posted on social media of a snow-capped ridge or the blue hues of a mountain lake. But on one occasion, these hikers were stopped abruptly. “Bear tracks,” one of them uttered in a soft voice. The imprints were frighteningly fresh—and large. The hikers obeyed the warning signal and retreated.

Through the prophet Jeremiah, God warned Israel about what was to happen to them. The king had shed the blood of innocent people and oppressed the poor—not to mention worshipping pagan gods. He was not shamed by his sin. Because God’s warnings were disobeyed, allies would fall away, disgrace would come, and calamity would befall the nation.

My daughter and her friends were grateful for the warning given so clearly: Danger! Bear nearby. Sometimes I am not so thankful for an alert and would rather ignore the sign and do as I please. But if I am open to God’s voice, I know that God always expresses love for me and for all His children. God warns us through the Ten Commandments and advises us through the guidance of trusted Christian friends. He often says to his beloved sons and daughters: Warning: danger is nearby.

**Loving and caring God**, open my heart to Your leading, and may I pay attention to Your signs to guide my path. Amen.

## God Is Sovereign

**“As surely as I live,” declares the LORD . . .** (Jeremiah 22:24).

**Scripture:** Jeremiah 22:24-30

**Song:** “Eternal Father, Strong to Save”

There was a time when I raced through each day. I tried to do everything myself. I thought I could accomplish anything with just a little more determination. I pushed through tasks and responsibilities because, I thought, no one else could accomplish the undertaking. Then I had a boating accident and cracked several ribs. The pain was intense with every movement. I could do nothing for months. One morning I awoke to a quiet world covered with snow. Nothing moved. Everything was beautiful and caught in a perfect stillness. God seemed to be sending me a message.

God was also sending a message to King Jehoiachin: God is alive, is in charge, and will right all injustices. The king would be given over to Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. He would be hurled into captivity without descendants to rule on the throne of David in Judah. The sovereign God would see to Jehoiachin's fall.

God's message to me was, “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). In other words, surrender to His will. Don't try to go it alone. Don't think that you are really in charge. There are times when God wants me to be active in righting injustices. There are, however, many other times when it is time for stillness, for listening, and for knowing that He is the God who lives.

**Everlasting God,** help me to rest in You and to desire Your will each day of my life, that I might magnify and glorify You. In Jesus' name, amen.

## When We Disappoint God

**“This is what the LORD says: Do what is just and right”**  
(Jeremiah 22:3).

**Scripture:** Jeremiah 22:1-10

**Song:** “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy”

In my adult life, people have disappointed me. Friends have made promises that went unfulfilled, my children lied and disobeyed me, coworkers failed to follow through on important assignments . . . Not that I am faultless. I am sure that I too have disappointed others. And I have disappointed God.

Throughout the Old Testament, God’s people disregarded their relationship with Him. God would send prophets to remind them to repent, but most would not listen. At first glance at today’s reading, I assume that God exacts a final and lasting retribution upon those who would dare to disobey Him. In His justice, He would bring destruction and ruination. If the king and the people failed to obey, they would experience calamity. Nothing but rubble would remain of the kingdom. But to dwell here overlooks an essential part of the Christian gospel—the cross of Christ.

Indeed, I am grateful to God for Christ and the cross that show me God’s great love for the world. When I know that I have stumbled, erred, and sinned—when I have turned my eye from the violence, failed to hear the cries of the alien, lacked compassion for the widow—God has chastened me. But when I follow His way, God is pleased and the world is a better place.

**Merciful and loving Lord,** help me never to get so concerned with the things of this world that I neglect to listen to You and do Your will. Amen.

## A Godly Heritage

**“I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying” (Genesis 28:13).**

**Scripture:** Genesis 28:10-17

**Song:** “Find Us Faithful”

Pat is a great-great-grandmother who rejoices in God’s work in her life in spite of crippling rheumatoid arthritis. She loves her family and wants them to love Jesus too. She wrote out her life story to share. The results have been thought-provoking for her family. They have seen through Pat’s narrative how God always guides.

Jacob had a godly heritage through his grandfather Abraham and father, Isaac, who had been blessed by their faith in God. Jacob no doubt heard from them many instances of God’s provision. In spite of his heritage, Jacob sometimes depended on himself instead of God. While Jacob was fleeing his angry brother Esau, God reached out to Jacob and promised him many descendants who would live on the land.

Often our families are hardest to reach for Christ, because they know all our flaws. But like Pat, we can share our journey of faith through writing or recording. God can use this witness to strengthen us and draw our descendants closer to himself.

**Holy Father,** thank You for reaching out to us so we can be part of Your family. Help us to be witnesses of what You have done for us. In Jesus’ name, amen.

May 26

## God's Powerful Grace

**“We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved”** (Acts 15:11).

**Scripture:** Acts 15:10-17

**Song:** “Wonderful Grace of Jesus”

Martin longed for a personal relationship with God. He confessed his sin—over and over. His prayers seemed unanswered. Sermons did not help. When he studied God's Word, he finally understood that he could not do anything to gain salvation; it was a gift from God. Then reformer Martin Luther accepted God's free gift and became a dedicated follower of Christ.

Most of the early Christians came out of Judaism. Because of their Old Testament law background, they found it hard to understand that God would accept a person solely because of His grace. They thought that there must be more to it than simple faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior. Many people today think the same way. But as Martin Luther found, accepting God's grace is exactly what God requires.

The only way to receive God's favor is to accept Jesus Christ as our Savior. Many have not yet taken this all-important step of faith. Others may have prayed for His salvation, but do not feel as if they know Him well. Wherever we are on our spiritual journey, God stands ready to accept us when we repent of our sin. He wants us to know Him better. We can learn to love Him more in prayer, reading His Word, and worshipping Him.

**Thank You, Lord Jesus,** for dying on the cross for our sin. Thank You for Your grace in accepting sinners who come to You in faith. In Your name, amen.

## Blessed to Be a Blessing

**Blessings will come on you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God** (Deuteronomy 28:2).

**Scripture:** Deuteronomy 28:1-6, 15-19

**Song:** “Trust and Obey”

At the age of 50, AJ suffered a stroke while driving on a busy expressway. It was only by God’s grace that she safely steered over to the side. While recuperating, AJ promised the Lord she would wholeheartedly work for Him until He called her to Heaven. And having been given many additional years, she strives to be salt and light by serving on several professional boards and committees, as well as volunteering one day per week at a hospital. She joyfully blesses others by encouraging them.

Moses spoke God’s words plainly to the children of Israel while they wandered in the wilderness. God promised to bless the people if they obeyed Him. His blessings would be numerous: peace from enemies, prosperity, abundant crops, and many children. However, if they chose to disobey, they would be cursed by God. They would experience many troubles as a nation and individual families.

Being blessed by God comes from following what He says. Obeying Him does not guarantee a trouble-free life. However, God has promised to bless us especially through difficult times. When we live His way, He guides and keeps us. He has promised never to leave or forget us. Even when we go our own way, He forgives us if we repent and turn back to Him. Then we can tell others about His blessings.

**Lord**, please forgive us when we go our own way. Help us to tell others how You have blessed us. In Christ’s name, amen.



## Fears in the Dark

**[Joseph] got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt** (Matthew 2:14).

**Scripture:** Matthew 2:13-15

**Song:** “Like a River Glorious”

Dad was supposed to pick me up after a school band concert. Where was he? Only 10 years old, I worried that something had happened. The school was closed and darkness came quickly. There were no cell phones back then, and no outdoor pay phones. I was afraid someone might hurt me. I knew God was there, so I prayed—a lot. Finally, Dad drove up, so apologetic. He had dozed off in his recliner after work. I thanked God I was safe.

God chose Joseph to be Jesus’ earthly father. God’s angel had spoken to him about marrying Mary. Several months after Jesus’ birth, an angel visited Joseph at night to tell him to flee to Egypt for his family’s protection. King Herod had commanded that boys under 2 years old be killed. Despite any fear, Joseph immediately obeyed.

Many of us experience fear about a present situation or the future. We fret and worry that something bad will happen. But we need to remember that God knows our circumstances and has promised to always be with His children. Writing down Bible examples of God’s help can be comforting. Prayer is another big weapon. God is always there to listen to His children. He cherishes each one and wants us to understand His love for us.

**O God,** help us remember that You are always available to calm our fears. Thank You for this reassuring promise. In Your holy name, amen.

## God's Discipline—Our Growth

**“I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them” (Hosea 11:4).**

**Scripture:** Hosea 11:3-6

**Song:** “Have Thine Own Way, Lord”

Training a dog is somewhat similar to being a parent. The frisky puppy learns to obey commands, given in a firm but kind voice. The trainer uses treats and encouraging words when the dog obeys. The result should be a trained dog that willingly obeys commands because he loves and respects his trainer.

God disciplined Israel because they followed false gods. He allowed them to be taken captive. Captivity sounds harsh, but He led them lovingly and kindly. He did not forget them, but took care of them each day. God disciplines His children so they can become more like Jesus. Without the Holy Spirit in our lives, this goal is impossible. We will never reach perfection until we are in Heaven. But discipline helps us mature in our faith.

We can thank the Lord for those who have helped discipline us, spurring us on to grow as Christians. Our parents may have been our first teachers about the ways of the Lord. Sunday school teachers and ministers imparted God's truth to us during our childhood or young adulthood. Even if these instructors are now gone to the Lord, we can honor them by thanking the Lord for them. And we can step up to reach out to new believers to help them grow, too.

**Thank You,** Lord, for the people who helped discipline us in our faith. Guide us to become trainers of younger Christians, too. In Jesus' name, amen.

## Useful for God

**Formerly [Onesimus] was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me** (Philemon 11).

**Scripture:** Philemon 8-21

**Song:** “Make Me a Blessing”

Charles Colson performed any politically motivated act he was asked to do—legal or not. Christian friends tried to help Colson see his need of Jesus as Savior. Finally, he accepted Christ and totally changed. But because of his crimes, Colson went to prison. There he shared the gospel with other convicts. That was the beginning of Prison Fellowship, an organization that has helped lead thousands to Christ. Formerly “useless” for God, Colson became useful for God.

Paul wrote to his fellow Christian, Philemon, whose slave Onesimus had run away. When Paul shared the gospel with him, Onesimus accepted Christ. Paul appealed to Philemon to welcome his returning slave as a brother in Christ. He knew the slave had been useless to his master. Now Onesimus was ready to be useful by serving God in his work.

Sometimes we wonder whether we are useful for God. We see no result after witnessing to a friend or relative for years. We may be afflicted or bedridden. Or perhaps our sin makes us feel useless. But God knows our hearts. He wants us to desire to be used of Him. It may be behind the scenes. God may want us to have a listening ear or give a hug to a friend. He may give us an opportunity to share our testimony with a stranger on a flight. We don’t know what an impact we can make with even a small action. But God knows.

**Lord**, please give us wisdom to know how we can be useful for You today—and give us the courage to do it. In Your name, amen.

## Love and Justice

**You must return to your God; maintain love and justice, and wait for your God always** (Hosea 12:6).

**Scripture:** Hosea 11:1, 2, 7-10; 12:1, 2, 6-14

**Song:** “Amazing Grace”

William Wilberforce was a short, sickly man who faced giants in England in the early 1800s. A Christian member of Parliament, William worked for 20 years to abolish England’s African slave trade. He was encouraged by John Newton, who knew slavery’s evils firsthand. A former slave-ship captain, Newton found the Lord, who turned his life completely around. Newton was the author of the autobiographical hymn “Amazing Grace.” Both men saw the abolition of slavery as vital for justice.

Israel in Hosea’s time had become enslaved to sin. They had not lived up to God’s standards, but worshipped idols. They oppressed their poor. God had been faithful to His promises, but the people had been unfaithful to Him. They deserved punishment.

Perhaps we think God should have been either loving or just to His errant people. We may picture God as an old loving uncle who ignores bad things we do. Or we see Him as the stern judge who has no room for reprieve. But our Father is both loving and just. He sees us for what we are—sinners in need of a Savior. And He exacts firm justice—death—as any righteous judge would. But Jesus as our mediator advocates for us, having taken our place when He died on the cross for our sins.

**Lord Jesus,** thank You for being our mediator before the Father. Thank You that God is both loving and just to each of us. In Your name, amen.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.