

Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires

Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark (James 3:5).

Scripture: James 3:1-12

Song: “Speak Life”

Smokey Bear (in the longest-running, public service advertising campaign) said, “Remember . . . Only YOU Can Prevent Forest Fires.” He reminded us all that wildfires are mainly caused by careless individuals. Every year, videos of raging fires grab our attention and might look like the end of the world as we know it.

As forests and other natural areas are set on fire by a small spark, so too the tongue (a small part of the body in a human being) can be deadly and devastating to our lives. Many adults suffer their entire lives from hurtful words spoken to them as children. Heated arguments often become violent, and one violent action can ruin a person’s entire life.

“The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit” (Proverbs 18:21). God gives us wisdom and power to curb the tongue, if we will. Paul said that God, through Jesus Christ, rescues us from the wretched state of our bodies (Romans 7:24, 25). By meditating on Christ and on “things above” (Colossians 3:2), and by speaking words of encouragement and life to ourselves and to others, we can overcome the snares of our tongues and be a blessing to others.

Lord, help me to use my tongue as an instrument of love and healing in this world. For Your glory, amen.

Beyond the Birth Pains

“All these are the beginning of birth pains” (Matthew 24:8).

Scripture: Matthew 24:3-14
Song: “My Savior First of All”

At 39 weeks pregnant, Amber Miller completed the Chicago Marathon with her husband, grabbed a bite to eat, and then headed to the hospital, where she gave birth the same day. To me, that seems like a strenuous and painful 24-hour period!

In today’s passage, Jesus compared the well-recognized pain of childbirth with the circumstances around us. He predicted future events that paint a stark portrait of our broken world. Ever since the fall, sin has permeated the earth, and sin always produces pain. However, Jesus left us an example and a promise to sustain us through the “birth pains” of life. Hebrews 12:2 tells us that Jesus is “the pioneer and perfecter” of our faith. In addition, He demonstrated His focus on the joy set before Him at the cross. We also can endure in this broken world because of the coming joy. When we leave behind this world, we will abandon the anguish bound up with it and enter the face-to-face reality of eternity with Jesus Christ. And as mothers often say, “Once you hold the baby, you forget all about the pain you were in.”

Jesus, help me to accept pain in this life as You did—knowing that pain will end—and to behold the joy set before me. Help me to allow pain to grow and strengthen me. Help me to hate sin and to love You. In Your name I pray. Amen.

Ignorance Is Not Bliss

He that remaineth in this city shall die . . . but he that goeth forth . . . shall live (Jeremiah 38:2, KJV).

Scripture: Jeremiah 38:1-6

Song: “Tis So Sweet”

Recently I flipped through a hardback book returned to the library where I work and found 4 bedbugs in its pages. When I removed the book's outer cover, I found roughly 15 more of them living beneath it. Although this discovery was unpleasant, to ignore the bugs or choose to overlook them would have been disastrous.

In a sense, we find King Zedekiah hiding bedbugs under a book cover. In unbelief, Zedekiah rejected the wise counsel God had given him through Jeremiah and, instead, followed his own understanding. The outcome was exactly as God predicted. Reading beyond today's text we see King Zedekiah's tragic end (Jeremiah 39:5-7).

Through His Word, God shares truth with us. Truth is not always easy to swallow or to live out. Sometimes God tells us things we don't want to hear—about our sin, about wisdom, or maybe about what living for God will require of us. Rather than rejecting God's words and trying to make our own way, we can submit to and rest in the truths that God gives us. In His kindness, God's will toward us is always good, motivated by His love for us (Romans 8:28, 29).

Lord, help me to believe what You say and live according to Your instructions. I know that You are good, merciful, compassionate, and loving toward me. I trust that Your commands lead me to life. In Your name, amen.

You Have Mail

... the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you (1 Thessalonians 3:9).

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Song: “I Saw Jesus in You”

In college, I checked my mailbox daily. I would spin the lock, pry the little door open, and hold my breath hoping for a letter, a package slip, a memo . . . something. Anything. All I wanted was word from home, a tidbit of encouragement from a friend, or familiar handwriting scrawled across an envelope. And on the rare occasions when I received a letter, I was ecstatic to hear from people far away.

Paul had poured his time, effort, and love into the Thessalonian believers because he wanted them to thrive for Christ. He had been longing for news about them. At last, Timothy brought back a good report of their church, and Paul was ecstatic over their spiritual growth.

As believers, we can sometimes forget the joy of investing in others. We so easily become caught up in our own lives that we forget to be intentional about ministry. We can become lazy about asking friends how we can pray for them, or we grow lax in finding ways to fill the needs of people in our churches, or we stop looking for unbelievers who need Christ. Paul’s investment in the believers at Thessalonica mirrors the message of Philippians 2:4 to concern ourselves with “the interests of the others.”

Father, help me to intentionally invest in someone today and to share in the joy of what You are doing in that person’s life. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Sunken Ships and Broken Promises

“All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’” (Matthew 5:37).

Scripture: Matthew 5:33-37

Song: “I Will Trust”

“Even God himself couldn’t sink this ship,” Captain Edward John Smith allegedly said of the *Titanic*. More than 100 years later, we still cringe at the devastating hubris and irony in even such a thought. Not one person was able to avert the tragedy once it started.

Today’s passage on our language silhouettes God’s wisdom and power against our limited insight. Most of us have been exposed to puffed up arrogance in bold but empty words. Perhaps we have spoken such words or made such claims.

But those statements actually aim to establish our will above God’s, claiming a kind of power that we do not truly possess. We simply cannot guarantee all our promises. We can only speak for ourselves and what is true about us. Restricting our declarations to a simple and honest “yes” or “no” helps us avoid statements that we are unable to accomplish.

When we embrace our roles as God’s beloved children and as stewards of the life He gives, we begin to want what God wants rather than wanting our own will. We learn to say “Thy will be done” (Luke 11:22, KJV) rather than making promises that we can never safeguard. And that place of submission and contentment is an unsinkable haven in which we truly live in freedom.

Father, sometimes the things that I want are not what You want for my life. Align my stubborn heart beneath Your will for me. I know You will always choose good for me. In Jesus’ name, amen.

August 28

The Lens of Love

Charity shall cover the multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8, KJV).

Scripture: 1 Peter 4:7-11

Song: “Love Lifted Me”

I remember the moment I tried on my first pair of prescription eyeglasses. All the blurred edges, faces, and shapes around me transformed with intricate and beautiful texture and detail. It felt as if the world changed that day; but in truth, it didn’t. My perception did. Corrective lenses changed the way I saw the world.

In this passage, Peter draws out a beautiful characteristic of love: it covers a multitude of sins. That word “cover” means to hide, veil, or pardon. The lens through which we are called to see people is a lens of love, and love changes everything.

Who has hurt you? Does a name or face come to mind? That person—he or she is the one who needs your love to cover them. And if that thought is too difficult to swallow and you find yourself shrinking back in response to it, then take heart. Gaze at Jesus long and hard, and taste His love yet again. His love covered my heinous sin, and yours. Thousands of years before we asked for forgiveness, He laid down His life for us on behalf of our sin—our crimes against Him. He can teach us to extend that same love to those in our own lives who have hurt us. In fact, He will supply the love itself.

Father, thank You that Your love covers the multitude of my sins. I need Your grace to love others the way You love me. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Better Than Wi-Fi

The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much (James 5:16, KJV).

Scripture: James 5:13-20

Song: “His Eye Is on the Sparrow”

Much of daily life is connected to the Internet—social media, online news, and even our jobs. Whether at a restaurant, shopping center, hotel, work, or at home, you likely have access to Wi-Fi, a hotspot, or data. Access to the online world becomes unlimited.

Notice the pattern in today’s Scripture. James encouraged believers to respond to the external circumstances in their lives with prayer—that unlimited access to the only one who could do something about the things they were facing. In affliction, in sickness, in sin, and on behalf of each other—pray, James says.

Have you ever viewed prayer as a chore? I have. But James does not intend for believers to view prayer in that way. James recognized the immense privilege of prayer. As the half brother of Jesus, James had walked alongside Jesus on this earth and had lived through Christ’s ascension. What a gift, then, it would have been to know that although Jesus was bodily gone, access to Him would not be cut off.

Jesus hears and answers every prayer. Through Jesus’ life and death, we are granted unlimited, bold access to God: “by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body” (Hebrews 10:19, 20).

Father, thank You for the privilege of unlimited access to You through prayer. Help me to respond to everything in life—the good and the bad—by taking it all to You in prayer. In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen.

Negative Seventeen

Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom (James 3:13, KJV).

Scripture: James 3:13-18; 5:7-12

Song: “May the Mind of Christ”

This morning, the outdoor thermometer read -17 degrees Fahrenheit. When I ventured outside, I did so fully “ballooned” in my warmest winter gear. I suppose I could have disregarded the temperature, dressed as if it were +71 degrees, and then marched out to shovel the driveway. But then I likely would have returned indoors frostbitten. Why did I wear warm clothing? Wisdom.

In this passage, James emphasizes our need for wisdom. Wisdom is not having all the facts; that is knowledge. Rather, wisdom is applying the knowledge that we have already been given. I didn’t need to know how long it would take to achieve frostbite in order to make a wise choice. I already had the necessary information to know that I must dress warmly or face negative consequences.

As believers, we have knowledge in the Scripture, as well as the promise of God that He will give us wisdom 100 percent of the time that we ask for it (James 1:5). And as we have seen in our reading for today, there are so many instances when we desperately need wisdom. In our spiritual lives, let us not lay aside the “winter coat and gloves.” Let’s stop to ask God for the wisdom He’s already promised.

Father, thank You for Your 100-percent promise of wisdom. Help me not to try to figure out life on my own, but rather to gain knowledge from You, to ask You for wisdom, and to be diligent to live according to it. In Christ, amen.

God Remembers You

Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and enabled her to conceive (Genesis 30:22).

Scripture: Genesis 30:22-24; 35:16-20

Song: “Mighty to Save”

I felt forgotten. My middle school friends suddenly decided that I was no longer a part of “their” group. The votes were in, and I had been ruled out. I looked into my friends’ eyes and knew the truth: they didn’t want to sit with me. So I reluctantly turned around and found a new place to sit. With each passing day, I found my lonely table growing more full. Eventually, God brought new friends into my life, but I will always remember being forgotten.

Maybe you have felt rejected, alone, and forgotten. Looking into today’s passage, I can imagine that Rachel felt the same way. All she wanted was to have a child, yet she remained childless. Despite Rachel’s despair, God’s faithfulness remained. He heard her prayers and answered with a son. He remembered her!

The Lord remembers us as well. Although others may let us down, God’s love remains steadfast. Wherever you are—both location and circumstance—God sees you. Though we may feel forgotten at times, our Savior never misses a moment. No amount of our suffering slips through the cracks. He remembers our pain and never lets it go to waste.

Dear Lord, thank You for remembering us. You are always faithful and never leave our sides. Please help us to remember You in our despair and receive Your peace. In Jesus’ name, amen.