



July/August 2011

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew

NEW LIFE IN  
THE MINOR PROPHETS

ALSO: GRACE IN COMMUNITY

Dear friend,

A few months ago, friends invited my wife and me to spend a weekend at a lighthouse on one of the Great Lakes surrounding the state of Michigan. The lighthouse is 150 years old, and as I sat in the living room of what once were the assistant lighthouse keeper's quarters, I imagined all the families that once occupied this space.



I was also fascinated by the new light that replaced the old lighthouse. It stood on metal scaffolding near the old lighthouse. I wasn't impressed by the intensity of the light until it became quite dark. Then I realized the power of the special lens that concentrated the light into powerful beams shining far out onto the water.

I'm not generally impressed, either, with the light I generate for Christ's kingdom. It's not very bright. But God has his ways of intensifying the beam. He often does that by bringing Christians together into communities of faith that we call churches.

I'm thankful that the light I can generate for the kingdom is intensified by my life in community with others. During these summer months, as you spend time in personal or family devotions with these meditations, I hope you also seek out a community of faith where you can join your light with the light of others. You'll be amazed by how much more brightly your light will shine.

In Christ's Service,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bob Haysink".

Bob

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**“Grace in Community”**  
**David Den Haan**



**“New Life in the  
Minor Prophets”**  
**Rob Toornstra**

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# this issue

## Grace in Community—July 2011

**David Den Haan**  
**Jenison, Michigan**

Scripture speaks highly about Christ's church. But the church as we know it has more than a few flaws and failures. We'll gladly talk about Christ, but we're not always so sure about the church! If we want to become faithful disciples of Jesus, however, we need life lessons taught within the community of faith. In July we'll reflect on what we can learn from being in community with others in Christ. Though the church is not perfect, in Christ we can find many evidences of God's grace and goodness in it.

*Pastor Dave Den Haan has served at Fairway Christian Reformed Church in Jenison, Michigan, since 1999. Previously he served a church in Minnesota. Dave and his wife, Connie, have three children.*

## New Life in the Minor Prophets—August 2011

**Rob Toornstra**  
**Salem, Oregon**

The Scriptures that we call the Minor Prophets may be "minor" in size (they're short) but not in impact. In these often overlooked books we find a beautiful portrait of God's salvation and his call to holy living. The prophets call us to salvation—sometimes with words of judgment, sometimes with words of hope, always with words of grace. So in August let's listen to the Minor Prophets as they call us to experience newness of life, now offered in Jesus!

*Rob Toornstra has served as pastor of Sunnyslope Christian Reformed Church in Salem, Oregon, since 2006. When not busy with pastoral duties, he enjoys spending time with his wife, Amy, and their three children.*

## GOD'S PATTERN

*They devoted themselves . . . to fellowship . . . .*

—Acts 2:42

Have you heard about the “virtual church”? It’s church experienced totally through the internet. People worship by logging onto a website and watching the worship service on their computer screen. They send in donations by credit card. They participate in communion with the wine and bread near their keyboard. The virtual church may be helpful for some people who can’t go outside or who have no church in their area, but it is not the best choice if people use it to avoid meeting with other Christians.

Today’s passage shows that when God calls a person to himself, he also calls that person into a community of faith, the church. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit drew people into belief in Christ and into fellowship with one another.

Many people today have lost sight of the pattern of community God intends for the church. Pointing to failures in individual Christians or particular churches or congregations, people often say they’ll take Jesus but not the church.

But God doesn’t call the church “the bride of Christ” for nothing (see Ephesians 5:25-32). In spite of its shortcomings, the church—its people and its institutions—belongs to Jesus and is full of beauty!

Let’s explore some of that beauty together this month.

“Open our eyes, Lord. We want to see Jesus.” We want to see the beauty of what you are doing in your community, Christ’s body, his bride, your church. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

## OLD AND YOUNG

*In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.*

—Galatians 3:26

There they stood, at the front of the sanctuary, reading the call to worship together. John was about seven, and Bill was at least seventy-seven. John's voice was the voice of young faith. Bill's voice was the voice of mature faith. Both voices spoke the text, but the younger voice rang with hope for God's continuing work in this world, while the other rang with God's faithfulness experienced over a lifetime of discipleship. What a gift to hear those two voices blend together!

There are few places in the world where people of different generations interact with one another, and even in those few places it's rare for a young child and an elderly adult to join as a team to accomplish something important. Especially in Western culture the generations are kept apart, sometimes pitted against

one another and often wary of each other.

The church is called to be different. It's on a mission to tear down the walls that society puts up. In the church of Jesus Christ people are one, regardless of age, ethnicity, or gender. This unity is God's gift to us to display to the world. No human difference can outweigh the power of the cross to gather all peoples under its banner.

I don't remember the passage that John and Bill read together. But I do remember what their Sunday morning partnership told me: the church is where we belong to God and to one another.

Young or old, male or female, from every nation—we are all precious in your sight, Lord! Thank you! In Jesus, Amen.

**EVERYBODY**

*Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD.*

—Psalm 150:6

I like to walk into our church's sanctuary on weekday mornings. The memories of the previous Sunday are still fresh while plans for the Sunday ahead are taking shape. The big room is absolutely quiet. Hundreds of chairs are all empty and neat. The piano sits with its dust cover on, and the pulpit has nothing on it but a closed songbook.

I remember the people I saw the Sunday before. Some are grappling with great grief. Others are enjoying the best times of their lives. Some are living close to God. Some don't feel very close to God at all. Still others aren't concerned one way or another.

But all are called to praise. Just like the various instruments named in Psalm 150, the various people in our congregation, with their various situations in life, are all called to bring to the

Lord the most powerful praise they can muster.

And, wonderfully, in that praise, stubborn hearts can be softened to God's grace and distant hearts can be brought closer to God.

Today is Sunday, and God's people will assemble again. They'll make some noise as they meet and greet each other, and they'll make some noise during worship. And it will be wonderful, because all of it belongs to God!

All our praise is yours, O Lord! May you be praised everywhere today, as your church gathers to do what no other institution or body on earth can do—worship you. Amen.

## A REFUGE

*"Be still, and know that I am God . . . ."*

—Psalm 46:10

It was a Tuesday evening almost ten years ago. The people filing into our church's sanctuary were hushed and quiet. It was as if they had silently decided that happy chatter was not appropriate for this moment. Virtually the only words being shared were those projected onto the front wall of the sanctuary, words from Psalm 46:10: "Be still, and know that I am God."

It was September 11, 2001. That morning terrorists had flown two planes into the twin towers in New York City, another one into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and yet another, diverted from its target by brave passengers, onto a field in Pennsylvania.

Though the earth hadn't given way and the mountains hadn't fallen into the sea, many in the free world felt as if the world as

they knew it had been turned upside-down.

Scores of churches, including ours, opened their doors and gathered in people from their communities. They became a refuge for anxious people. They pointed people to the God whose rivers of grace and provision make glad all who trust in him. They testified to the greatness of God, our "ever-present help in trouble." They did what the church is supposed to do, proclaiming God's favorite command to the frightened: "Do not fear."

May it be, sovereign God, that in all nations of the world the church of Jesus Christ proclaims this truth with confidence: "The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress." Amen.

## HEROIC HOSPITALITY

*We ought . . . to show hospitality . . . so that we may work together for the truth.*  
—3 John 8

Moving to a new church 12 years ago was hard for my wife. While I was eager to jump into a new ministry, she was left dealing with our two kids while getting used to a different house, a new community, and lots of friendly people who were not yet her friends. At the same time, her father was ill with cancer, and she was carrying our third child.

I thank God for two young moms in our new church who invited Connie to every social event they could think of. They weren't overbearing, but they made sure Connie didn't have to be alone if she didn't want to be. They rescued her from loneliness while her clueless husband was happily "doing the Lord's work." They were patiently persistent and absolute accepting of her. They were heroically hospitable!

So it was with Gaius. He welcomed traveling Christian teachers at great expense to himself, while facing opposition from self-seeking people like Diotrefes. Gaius didn't like to see people standing alone (especially missionaries of the gospel), so he did something about it. It's not something you do because it's convenient. It's a decision to personify God's warm embrace so that others can experience it too.

Have you thought about how you can show hospitality to others?

Dear God, we want others to know you are a God of deep grace and warm embrace. Show us someone who is standing alone, and make us into heroes of hospitality. We pray in Jesus' name, and we cherish his leading. Amen.

## VEGETABLE LOVE

*We love because he first loved us.*

—1 John 4:19

“Love comes from God.” “God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.” See the connection? God, love. God, love.

God’s people, the church, are filled with Christ and shaped by his Spirit to teach this connection to the world. It isn’t enough for the church only to teach the connection between God and truth. Truth without love is cold. The church has a complementary calling: To make clear to the world the connection between God and love. In doing so, we help those around us to see how love and grace infuse the truth of the good news of Jesus.

A couple of years ago some folks at our church decided to do that through a community garden. Armed with donated manure, seeds, and fertilizer, they dug up

a huge section of the church’s backyard and turned it into a vegetable garden. Later they invited everyone in our church and neighborhood to help tend the garden and then harvest all the ripe veggies they wanted. I saw many neighborhood people walk into our garden with empty plastic bags and walk out with full ones. No charge. It was our church showing God’s love—as the signs around the garden made clear.

God, love. God, love. There are lots of ways to say it.

You’ve spoken “love” to us through Christ, dear God. Thank you! May our deeds and our words say the same to others. We pray this for the sake of the world and in Jesus’ name. Amen.

## HOPE ON LITTLE LEGS

*People brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them.*  
—Matthew 19:13

At a certain point in Sunday morning worship services our congregation's young children make their way up to the front. When they arrive, I lead them in a short prayer and then send them off to a time of worship in which they praise God and learn at their level of understanding.

It's fun watching them wander, run, walk, and trip up to the pulpit area. Some come all by themselves. Some come clutching an older sibling. And some come in the arms of their parents. It is also fun watching the people in the congregation as the children come down the aisle. Many have delighted grins on their faces as they watch the weekly processional—they are more engaged and excited at that point than at any other time in the worship service! They are seeing hope-on-little-legs, and it does their hearts good.

Jesus made room for children on his lap, and the church is called to cherish and make room for children in its life.

It's not that children are innocent. Instead, their neediness teaches us about our neediness. Their readiness to follow teaches us what real humility looks like. Their capacity for wonder and joy teach us the nature of genuine worship. They point us to God and give us the hope and trust that he loves us too!

Thank you for your love of our children, dear Jesus. Make us like them in every way that gives you pleasure! We pray with great hope for your work in us, whether we are big or little. Amen.

## A PLACE OF GRACE (HOPEFULLY)

*If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ . . . then make my joy complete. . . .* —Philippians 2:1-2

The woman standing at my door one afternoon was not happy with me. I had left on her “to do” list something that she had hoped to add to mine.

A month earlier she had volunteered to bring refreshments to a Bible study planned for this evening. But here she was, telling me that something had come up and she wouldn’t be able to come this evening.

Normally I would have said, “Okay . . . thanks for letting me know.” But this day had already been full of inconveniences. I was not in the mood for another. So I told her that it was up to her to find someone else to bring goodies for the group.

I was probably a little short with her. I know that I surprised myself a little.

I also noticed that she was more than a little irritated, and

that tonight’s study of Matthew might not be accompanied by snacks at all.

For a few weeks it was clear that her irritation had staying power.

But then, as time passed, she loosened her grip on her irritation. In fact, she eventually became a trusted colleague in ministry!

It may seem a small thing, but her willingness to release her irritation was a wonderful sign that the church can be a place of reconciling grace.

Thank you for gracious people, Lord! They remind us of you, and they call us to be gracious ourselves. In Jesus, Amen.

## PRESSED INTO NEW MINISTRY

*A great persecution broke out . . . [and] those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. —Acts 8:1, 4*

A few years ago our church began to mentor at-risk children who attend a nearby school. After a while some of the mentors began to invite the kids to our church's boys' and girls' programs.

We went to pick up one of the girls once and were surprised to find two little girls waiting for us (a cousin had been invited to come along). The following week there were four little girls waiting for us (two friends wanted to join the fun)! The volunteers who ran our church's boys' and girls' programs had to make room for the unexpected guests who came. You might say that God's blessing in one part of the church's ministry pressed another part of the church into new ministry. Sometimes God presents new opportunities for ministry in surprising ways.

That happened for the believers in Jerusalem—though much more dramatically. When they were pushed because of persecution, they developed new preaching ministries “wherever they went,” spreading the good news of Jesus.

The Spirit has mysterious ways of moving people into ministry. Later, the Lord even changed Saul into a missionary (see Acts 9:1-22; 11:19-30; 13:1-14:28).

God can be pushy sometimes. He doesn't mind using even persecution as an opportunity to do more ministry. Have you felt any divine nudges lately?

Lord, use us in any way you need us. And give us joy in new ministry opportunities, even if we face hard challenges. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## A SMILE OF BLESSING

*Christ himself gave . . . pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service . . .*  
—Ephesians 4:11-12

Our congregation's worship coordinator smiles a lot. That's important for anyone who often stands in front of a crowd of people to lead them in worship to God!

But our worship coordinator also smiles a lot when others stand at the microphone and lead in worship. After all, those are people he has nurtured and equipped, during practice times earlier in the week, to do their important work well.

I think part of the reason he smiles is to encourage those who are leading worship. I also think that his smile arises from the sheer pleasure of seeing other people engaged in ministry. It's a special joy to see those you have trained for their work step up and carry that work out! It's a delight to know that you have blessed someone to be a blessing to others.

Every Christian pastor, teacher, and worship coordinator knows something of that joy. Equipping other people for ministry is one of their primary tasks. In their work they are called to help the entire body of Christ, the church, grow to "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ"—and that brings great joy!

Give thanks to God today for the people who bless you through their ministries. And give thought to the ways your gifts might be enhanced to serve others!

We long for fullness, Lord—fullness in Christ! Thank you for providing people whose gifts and service move us further along toward that fullness. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## CLOTHING

*As God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with . . . love . . .*  
—Colossians 3:12-14

I used to ask people to fill out sermon evaluation forms for me (making sure they could do so anonymously). Most feedback was fairly positive, but I remember one evaluation form that came back with nothing but a brief note on the back. It said, "I don't like filling out forms. If you're doing something wrong, I'll let you know."

Hmmm. That meant that I would never hear anything positive from that person.

Sadly, that approach to communication can become a habit. Some people don't speak up unless something is making them angry or disappointed, something that doesn't measure up to their standards.

That's not the way Christ's disciples are called to act. If God has given you his grace and made you his through Jesus Christ,

then you have some very special clothing to put on every morning: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and the virtue that unites them all—love.

In other words, people shouldn't ever see you merely dressed in some kind of fabric. They should see that you have put on the "clothing" of love—that you are someone who can be trusted to say something helpful, true, and kind.

What's in your wardrobe? How do you clothe yourself each day?

May people see you in us, dear God. Dress us beautifully today, we pray! Outfit us with the characteristics of Christ's love. Amen.

## CREATED TO BE HOLY

*You were . . . created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*  
—Ephesians 4:22-24

“Hello, Rever’n’.” That was the way Ray always greeted me—even though I was young enough to be his grandson. I was only 26 years old, but to Ray I was still “Rever’n’” (short for “Reverend”). It’s a title that refers to respect and honor for my role as a minister, a representative of Christ.

Ray’s perspective came with his grasp of an important truth: that the church is holy and its leaders are commissioned to serve the church honorably “in Christ.” As we read in Ephesians, all believers are “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” So the body of believers is holy, separate from the world around it, being intimately connected to God through the cleansing blood of Christ.

Paul calls the Christians at Ephesus to be holy by putting away the godlessness and im-

morality of their surrounding culture. Instead they are to live out the calling they have received from God (see 4:1), *in* but not *of* the world.

Does the church always live that way? Sadly, it often behaves in such unholy ways that people turn away in disgust, saying they are willing to follow Jesus but not the church.

Ray reminds me, though, that the true church will always be holy because of its cleansing by Christ. Even though it is filled with sinful people, it is holy “in Christ.” Our connection to Christ defines us more than our sin does!

Help us to live up to the name Jesus has earned for us, O God. “In Christ” we are holy. Amen.

## A HOLY HUG

*“There will be more rejoicing . . . over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine . . . who do not need to repent.”*

—Luke 15:7

It was a hug that I’m glad I saw. I don’t remember much about it because I was quite young at the time.

But one day my dad, the pastor of our church, brought me with him to a meeting of the church elders. And there, I remember, my dad hugged someone. I also recall there was a man who had tears rolling down his cheeks. And the person being hugged was that man’s grown daughter.

I learned later that the woman who was being hugged had come home—home to her family, home to her church, home to God. That was probably the reason for her father’s tears. It was certainly the reason for the hug.

The elders and deacons who were there may have felt a little awkward about hugging in the council room, but they were delighted because of the home-

coming that had led to this holy hug. They were not modern-day versions of the religious leaders in Jesus’ day who resented that Jesus spent time with so-called sinners. The elders and deacons in the council room were thrilled to see that Jesus had touched this woman’s life with grace.

I’m glad I remember that holy hug. It reminds me of what the church, when it is doing its job, truly is: a home for sinners.

Dear Father, when the church is a safe place for broken people, it reveals you to the world. Move whatever needs moving in our church so that more holy hugs take place there in days to come. Amen.

## FELLOWSHIP

*We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us.* —1 John 1:3

A couple of years ago our congregation prayed around the clock for a week straight. We created a prayer room, covered the walls with prayer requests, and invited members of the congregation to sign up for an hour during that week. All but four of the 168 time slots got filled. My hour came early on Tuesday morning.

I had a powerful “aha” moment during my hour. It came as I read what those who had prayed in the room before me had written. In the blank spaces of the paper on the walls and in the prayer journal on the table people had recorded holy words. There were words of deep gratitude to God; words of peace, hope, and joy; and words of struggle with doubt, pain, and loss. It became clear that even though I was alone in the room, I was in the company

of fellow believers. I was with other people who were with the Father and his Son.

This is the fellowship we read about in our text—fellowship that God himself creates as he gathers people to faith through the proclamation of the gospel. It is fellowship we have with one another, whether we are in the same room or not. It is fellowship with others in God, and it makes our joy complete.

As you pray today, remember that you are connected with a community of fellow intercessors that circles the globe.

Dear God, keep us moving into genuine fellowship with one another in you. May it be the kind of fellowship that makes our joy complete by revealing your glory. Amen.

## PROOF OF GOD IN ACTION

*Now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord.*

—1 Thessalonians 3:8

Our church's prayer room expresses in a powerful way the fellowship of believers through the written comments people leave behind as they meditate and pray. Their descriptions of their time with God display in a real way their impressions of God in action. Whether written in the prayer journal on the table, posted as a note on the wall, or scrawled across the room's whiteboard, each expression of intercession, praise, or answered prayer is a testimony that God has been at work in each writer's life!

I think that all who read those expressions are affected in a way like Paul was when he heard Timothy's report. After ministering in Thessalonica Paul, Timothy, and their fellow missionaries had been chased out of the city by angry opponents of the gospel (see Acts 17). In the days and

weeks afterward Paul fretted over the new Christians back in Thessalonica, hoping they were weathering the storms of persecution. After sending Timothy back and then hearing Timothy's report of the spiritual vitality and growth in the Christians there, Paul knew: in spite of obstacles to the gospel, God was at work in Thessalonica! (See 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:5.)

Paul's profound joy ("Now we really live") is the kind of joy found only in the body of Christ: joy upon seeing our loving God at work in others, bringing them to himself.

Lord, fill us with true joy by building up your church and allowing us to see something of what you are doing. In Jesus' name, Amen.

**“I MISS THE ORGAN”**

*Live in harmony with one another. . . . Do not think you are superior.*  
—Romans 12:16

Our church has no organ. That could be a problem if you're a member and you love organ music. That was the case for a man seated across the table from me one day. He and his wife had moved into the area and had joined our congregation, leaving behind a church that had a beautiful organ. "At first," he said, "I didn't mind the piano, guitars, and drums. I wanted something different. But now I miss the organ"—and the tears at the corners of his eyes told me how much.

I expected that this might lead him to eventually leave our congregation. That's often the way people in North America handle disappointment with their church: they quietly leave for another church down the street. But even after several years my friend is still part of our congregation, singing both

contemporary and traditional songs with us—without the organ.

This man has been God's living lesson to me about brotherly love. His faithfulness to our church family is a picture of the genuine devotion to others that Paul is teaching in our text.

You and I all experience our share of disappointments with God's people. Do you find those disappointments transcended by God's love?

O Covenant God, by calling us to yourself, you call us to live with and to love all who are yours. Help us to do that, especially when our desires and longings go unmet. We need to grow beyond ourselves and our wants. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## DO YOU SEE WHAT GOD SEES?

*You are a chosen people . . . that you may declare the praises of him who called you . . . into his wonderful light. —1 Peter 2:9*

Today many of us are going to worship God. I hope you will!

You might see old friends, new friends, people you can relate to, and people you can't. You might rub elbows with the guy who botched the solo in the worship service last week or the woman who is your eleventh grader's "boring" church school teacher. You'll listen to the preacher who might again lurch toward his favorite issue rather than stick to the text.

After the worship service you may run into the person who is too intense about political issues, or the one who loves talking about all her bodily ailments, or the one who is always trying to pull you into his latest "project."

That may be what you see. But do you see what God sees? God sees all these people along with all the other broken, struggling,

less than "perfect" attenders in your congregation as his chosen people, his royal priesthood, his holy nation.

God also sees you! He paid a very high price to redeem each of you, and you all belong to him.

Today those who worship with you are hand-picked by God for the holy work of declaring his praises. They will take up their places in today's cosmic choir—alongside you and the rest of creation.

Cherish them. God does!

Open our eyes, Lord, to see you in the people with whom we will worship today. We want to see your holy nation, the community you've gathered by your great mercy. Amen.

**SOMEDAY**

*He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*  
—Philippians 1:6

“Someday I’ll be sitting in your chair.”

That’s what a young man said a few years ago while seated with the leadership of our church as he professed his faith in Jesus Christ. The young father had recently come to faith, and he was pointing all of us to the future. He was looking forward to the continuing experience of God’s work in his life, work by which God would prepare him to assume, someday, responsibilities in the church.

A few years later, having been entrusted with a leadership role in our church, he joyfully reminded me of that statement. It was deeply satisfying to see that God was surely at work in this young man. The Spirit of the Lord had been carrying on the work in this man’s life toward its eventual completion. His story

is a reminder that God is doing the same with each of us.

Where, besides the Christian community, can you see so regularly the unfolding beauty of God’s transformational work in people’s lives? Paul saw it in the Philippian congregation, and it gave him thankfulness and great joy.

Today, may God give you an awareness of the way in which he is working in your life to bring you to greater maturity as Christ’s disciple.

Thank you, Father, for your ongoing work in our lives through your Spirit. Open our eyes to your work in us and in others so that we may be led into joyful wonder and praise. Amen.

## INVESTIGATION

*Value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but . . . to the interests of others.*  
—Philippians 2:4

For several years some women in our congregation came to our building every Wednesday to pray. A couple of them often came early, stopping by to ask me a wonderful question: “What can we pray for on your behalf?”

That weekly ritual began because of a struggle. One of the women, who often disagreed with me on various points, was struggling with God. After a time she heard God calling her to pray for me. She wasn’t called to pray that God would change me. She told me she was called to pray for me without an agenda, simply out of love for me as her pastor.

Her visits over the following weeks and months bore that out—as did her work to gather others who would also pray for me. She looked beyond our disagreements and looked instead

to my interests, my needs, my hopes and dreams, my well-being. Actually, she investigated those things every week, which is what our verse is pointing to: not just a quick look but a careful investigation into others’ needs—an investigation that arises out of Christ-imitating love.

I suppose that non-Christians are capable of such loving investigations. But only Christians can go the next step, as this woman did, and take to God whatever their investigations uncover.

Is regular prayer for others one way you look to the interests of others?

Thank you for expert investigators, Lord. Teach us all this skill. And lead us to take our findings to you. In Jesus, Amen.

## IT'S POLICY

*Command and teach these things. . . . Set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love . . . .*

—1 Timothy 4:11-12

Years ago, while visiting the church I now serve, I was shown a thick binder. It was a copy of the congregation's policy manual, and it contained job descriptions for church staff, a procedure for accepting donations, the responsibilities of various committees, and so on. There was even a policy for reviewing policies!

Just looking through the manual made me tired. I am not naturally a detail person. However, having been at the church for a few years now, I can say I am thankful for the policy manual. Wisdom from the past, as collected in that binder, has often spared us from confusion and turmoil.

Large parts of Paul's first letter to Timothy are like a policy manual for a church in that day—Paul's wisdom to Timothy about various issues in the body

of believers. As in our church's policy manual, these guidelines were tools for *shalom* (peace and vitality) in the church. Neither church life nor church ministry can survive for long on good intentions. Both need structure.

Policies that support life and ministry reflect something of God. Remember, some of God's first acts in Scripture were to set policy: separating light from dark, and wet from dry, to make order from chaos (Genesis 1). Like God's decrees, good policies establish and preserve *shalom*.

Lord, sometimes it's easy to bash policies and procedures. They seem so . . . unspiritual. Give us wisdom to know good policy from bad. And give us insight into you! Amen.

## WORSHIP IS ABOUT GOD

*Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering and come into his courts.*  
—Psalm 96:8

Just down the road from our church is a care facility for adults who are mentally and physically disabled. On most Sundays our church has the honor of hosting a number of them in our worship services. Sometimes people question whether the residents are really benefiting from the worship time, and sometimes we question if the loud noises that some of them make are too distracting for public worship. But those questions show how far it is possible to stray from the true purpose of worship.

Our consumerist culture teaches us to think worship is “all about us.” A great “worship experience” is one that people find convenient and entertaining. But Scripture teaches that true worship is not about us; it’s about God. It’s the holy work of praising him, celebrating his love, and

renewing our covenant relationship with him. God, first of all, is the one who should “get something out of it” (our adoration), and he is the one whom our worship should please.

Psalm 96 calls us (and all of nature!) to “sing to the Lord” and “praise his name.” Its God-centeredness is echoed in the presence of all who come to worship. God calls everyone to come to him, and he bids us to welcome all who do. (See Luke 14:15-24; 18:15-17.)

Dearest Father, you are worthy of our praise, our devotion, our obedience, and our love. Forgive us if we have been stingy with these things, and lead us to offer them to you, in whose name we pray. Amen.

## WHEN WORSHIP BECOMES EFFORTLESS

*Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength . . . .*

—Isaiah 40:31

Early one Sunday morning a woman's shaking voice on the phone told me that her husband had just had a stroke. I drove up in time to see the paramedics strap him onto a gurney and wheel him away—a tall, strong man who had "clean hands and a pure heart" (Psalm 24:4), who had been with our church since it began. The people who gathered for worship later that morning sat in stunned silence as I told them about his collapse.

Our brother's recovery took more than a year. But one Advent Sunday morning, three months after his stroke, we arranged for him to light the Advent candle. As he walked slowly to the front, the congregation again sat in silence. He lit the candle as a familiar promise of healing was read from Scripture. Then he walked slowly back to his seat—having

helped us all find a new way into those ancient words.

His physical healing was a sign of the *shalom* that God brings to all who hope in him. It doesn't always happen quickly. Sometimes the physical *shalom* of God's kingdom waits until the life to come. But when the worshipping community is given a sign of it, as we were that Advent morning, our strength is renewed, hope flares to life, and true worship, the adoration of God, becomes as natural as breathing.

Great Healer, enter our hearts today. Show us your healing touch and ignite the longing of our hearts. Thank you for the community of faith, a place to see things that help us grow steady and strong. In Jesus, Amen.

## THE BLESSING OF WHAT THEY DIDN'T DO

*"If a brother or sister sins, go and point out the fault, just between the two of you."*  
—Matthew 18:15

It wasn't the kind of meeting I had thought it would be. When the young couple first sat down across from me, I had thought they were going to talk about their baby, who had recently been born with a congenital heart defect. But, no, they had come to tell me that in the emotional crisis of dealing with their baby's multiple surgeries they had felt ignored and unsupported by me, their pastor. They were not saying I had sinned against them—which is the situation described in our text from Matthew 18. It was more that I had repeatedly let them down.

But the guidelines Jesus gives in Matthew 18 were still to the point. Instead of fuming silently, this couple had come to express themselves openly and in person. Instead of talking about me, they had come to talk with me. Instead of leaving

the church and finding a "better" pastor, they hoped to help me become a better pastor. The anticipation behind Matthew 18, the hope for restoration, was alive in the combination of their difficult words, warm hearts, and refusal to fume, gossip, or just depart.

Sometimes life in the church is marked by those last three, ugly things. I'm thankful for the many times it has been marked instead by difficult words lovingly spoken.

Father, may your peace fill our relationships today. May our communities of faith be places of love in both good and difficult times. Give us large hearts for one another—and a forgiving spirit. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## PRAISE AND PAIN

*I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me.*

—Psalm 77:1

A couple of years ago a friend in our church designed a worship service around three stories of pain shared by members of our congregation. The stories became the sermon as the people telling them spoke of struggle and of God's goodness in the middle of it.

Some people believe that Sunday is supposed to be filled only with happy things: praise songs and upbeat messages. But Sunday is also a day to be real with one another and with God about the pain in our lives. After all, Scripture itself is frank about our brokenness! It contains more psalms of lament than psalms of praise.

After that worship service people could be heard sharing their own stories of struggle. No one was talking about the latest road construction project, how well the local basketball team

did over the weekend, vacation plans, computer problems, or the best way to can peaches. It was as if those three stories had given everyone permission to be real with one another about the hard things in their own lives.

May you be led into genuine praise today. And may that praise be infused with an honesty about the brokenness in your own life and in the life of our world.

God reigns over all things—let the earth be glad!

Father, hear our praises as well as our cries for help. We know you love us and can carry all our burdens. Strengthen us for praise-filled, peace-filled life in this broken world. Amen.

## UNMET HOPES

*“Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”*  
—Matthew 11:3

Several years ago two people in our congregation created an ambitious outreach/renewal program. But despite lots of arm-twisting, budget squeezing, and calendar organizing, it became clear that we could not sustain the kind of effort the program required. We sadly (but with some relief) closed the program down.

After a while the two program leaders moved on to other nearby churches. I think the pain of seeing their church fail to live up to their high hopes was simply too much for them.

Everyone who loves the church understands that kind of pain. It comes when high hopes for the church collide with limitations. It’s similar to the kind of disappointment that John the Baptist experienced. His hopes for Jewish renewal and resurgence withered as the Messiah, Jesus, turned out to be less than

he had envisioned. The hated Romans still ruled Jewish territory (and had recently arrested John), and the corrupt religious leadership in Jerusalem still ruled Jewish hearts.

In effect, Jesus pointed out to John that prophecies of renewal were being fulfilled (in him), and he hinted that there was much more to come.

This is the hope we have for the church today too. In ways that may not look like much to us, prophecies of renewal are being fulfilled, and there is much more to come.

Father, we want to see the church of Christ soar. It pains us that instead it often crawls slowly. Teach us to be patient and gracious with others—just as you are with us. Amen.

## OLD AND YOUNG

*One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life . . . .*

—Psalm 27:4

Early one morning my task was to lead devotions for the students at a local Christian school. It was fun to see the place buzzing with lots of ordered activity, and it was great to talk with the students about the God who loves them.

The next thing on my “to do” list was to lead a funeral back at church. The woman who had died had lived well into her nineties, so this funeral was mainly a celebration of her long and saintly life. As her children and grandchildren were saying to one another, she was now in a better place.

God willing, the students I had seen earlier that morning may live well into old age too. And, by God’s grace, they may then look back and say it was good to have lived in the house of the Lord all the days of their lives. It’s not that they will have spent

time in the temple in Jerusalem, the “house” the psalmist was talking about. But, as New Testament believers, they will have spent time in the community where the Spirit of Christ lives today—in his church.

In this community we proclaim to one another God’s wonderful truth: whether we are old or young, the Lord is our light and our salvation. He is the stronghold of our lives.

Father, you gather your saints, old and young, into the church, binding us together into a community of faith. Thank you for drawing us in! Thank you for keeping us from standing alone. Amen.

## A HOLY SPREADSHEET

*There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. —1 Corinthians 12:6*

The baby had been born almost three months early. While he struggled to survive in the hospital's neonatal intensive care unit, his parents struggled to understand his medical situation, care for one another and for their other two children, and keep hope alive.

Back at our church a member of the pastoral care team put together a care plan for this family. This woman has great gifts of organization and hospitality. The spreadsheet she eventually created included columns for meals, rides to the hospital, rides from the hospital, and caretakers for the two siblings. Several weeks' worth of columns were quickly filled with the names of helpful people, but it was the organized hospitality of the pastoral care giver that tied it all together into an extraordinary ministry.

Volunteers like these do their work as an act of worship. They use the gifts that God gave them to make beautiful things happen for others, and the people who benefit from their ministry truly see God's work in it.

The child is now strong and healthy, thank God. And his parents still have the spreadsheet as a testimony of the church's care.

How do you use your gifts to serve God?

We praise you for your care, awesome God! You give us gifts and send us into ministry. When we experience pain, you send us people to make us recipients of ministry. In either case, we see something of your beauty and love. Amen.

## CHRIST REIGNS!

*"I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."*  
—Acts 7:56

I once heard of a small seminary that offered three New Testament survey courses. One course taught the four gospels. Another course taught all the books that were written as letters to churches or individuals. A third course combined what was left over: the books of Acts and Revelation.

That last course might sound like an odd combination, but the professor said it worked quite well because Acts and Revelation say essentially the same thing: Christ reigns! Acts proclaims, in narrative form, the story of Christ establishing his church throughout the world. Revelation proclaims that truth apocalyptically, with symbols and numbers and images that show Christ preserves his church and establishes his reign throughout the universe.

Just before he was martyred, Stephen saw a spectacular vision of the truth that Christ reigns. He saw Christ standing at the right hand of God, in triumph. This vision must have encouraged him greatly during the agony of his stoning.

We who follow Christ today are also given visions of Christ's reign! Maybe we don't actually see Jesus in heaven, but in story after story of people living for and serving their Lord, we see Jesus alive and well, reigning over his church and cosmos.

O Christ, in the faces and stories of your people we see what your Word proclaims: you are alive and well, reigning over this world and extending grace through your followers. Thank you! In your name we pray. Amen.

## OUR GREAT GOD IS ALWAYS WORKING

*He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*  
—Philippians 1:6

The coordinator of our church's ministry to at-risk children had an "aha" moment the other day. She had been anxious because she hadn't had time to encourage the volunteer mentors that she led or to see if there were any problems or issues that needed to be handled. She had simply been too busy with other parts of the ministry.

After a while she simply cleared her calendar and called the mentors. There was a moment of fear as she began her calling. Would she hear of volunteers that had lost the drive to be a part of the ministry? Would she learn of children who were being difficult? Would there be an extended list of issues crying for her attention at the end of her long list of calls?

In spite of her fears, all of the mentors were doing fine, and most of them could clearly see

God at work through them! It turns out that what we read in Psalm 97 is absolutely true: "The Lord reigns!"

Our ministry coordinator rediscovered the truth that God calls us into partnership with him not because he *needs* to work through us but because he *loves* to work with us—and the Lord of all things is always at work in and through his people to keep his kingdom coming.

Lord, you are greater than any of us. Thank you for using us even though you don't need to. Thank you for carrying on to completion the good work you are doing in each of us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## A BEAUTIFUL BRIDE

*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her . . . .*  
—Ephesians 5:25

In many North American weddings, the moment a bride begins her walk down the aisle is very important. Everyone stands to join the groom in watching her as she processes to meet him.

That moment is important for the groom too, of course. He loves his bride and longs to have her with him. Her walk down the aisle is a picture of the approach that began before they met. And their meeting at the end of the aisle symbolizes the beginning of their new life together, which they pledge to continue throughout their lives.

Jesus loves his bride too. Our text makes that clear even as it calls earthly husbands to give themselves up in loving service to their wives. After all, Jesus gave himself up for his bride, the church, at the cross.

This month we've looked at many pictures of Christ's bride,

the church. We find ourselves in these pictures too, to some degree, because all who are "in Christ" are part of the church—all who are redeemed by him through the cross.

Rejoice! Together we are the one for whom Christ waits at the end of the aisle.

And love! Cherish Christ's church, even when the church is not so lovable. You'll be loving what Christ himself loves!

At the end of time, Lord Jesus, we will be with you completely and forever. Thank you for making that possible through your sacrifice at the cross. In the meantime, we pledge ourselves to you and to all who are part of the church, your bride. Amen.

## CHRIST'S BRIDE, HIS CHURCH

*Let us rejoice . . . ! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.* —Revelation 19:7

Again in today's reading we find that the church is called Christ's bride. The church is the "bride" of the Lamb, the slain-but-now-alive Savior, Jesus Christ. This text celebrates Christ's victorious reign over all things.

Jesus loves his bride! He gave himself up for her at the cross. He sent his Spirit to bring her to life and health. He continually provides for and protects her even when her human leaders are crooked and broken. Jesus loves his bride!

Today many of us who are part of Christ's bride, the church, get to spend a significant amount of time with her. We'll sing songs with her members, pray together, learn from Scripture together, drink coffee together, and share life together. And we'll do that repeatedly week after week, year after year.

In all of these gatherings we eventually see that the bride is not always beautiful in appearance. The people who form it are still broken, selfish, and hurtful. But at the end of time, when Christ returns, the wedding will finally take place. Jesus and his bride will proceed into new life together, a life of perfect love and intimacy, life that will last forever!

Then the Bride will truly be beautiful!

Your Spirit gives life, Lord Jesus. Please send your Spirit more and more fully to your Bride, the church. Help us who form her to love her, cherish her, and serve her, out of adoration for you, the Groom, our King. Amen.

## WHAT'S YOUR NAME?

*"Like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the LORD."*  
—Hosea 1:2

If you have children, how did you choose their names? Maybe you just liked the way they sounded. Maybe you chose names that honored family members. Or perhaps you chose a name for its meaning.

On the surface, Israel appeared to be thriving in Hosea's day. The land was peaceful. The harvest was plentiful. The economy was strong. But beneath this prosperity was spiritual decay. Israel was worshiping false gods, practicing sexual immorality, and engaging in other sins displeasing to God.

So God sent Hosea to warn Israel in a surprising way. God told Hosea to "marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her" and to give them names reflecting God's displeasure with his people. Each name is more severe than the one before it: "Jezreel" refers to Israel's

coming military defeat. "Lo-Ruhamah" means God's love for his people has grown cold. And "Lo-Ammi" signifies that Israel is no longer God's people.

Yet God's grace prevails! In time, Jesus carried the curse of those names. On the cross, Jesus became "Lo-Ammi" as the forsaken child of God. And through belief in Jesus we receive a new name that is more important than our birth name: "You are a chosen people, a holy nation . . . God's special possession" (1 Peter 2:9). How does your daily life reflect your new spiritual identity?

Father, we don't deserve to be called your people. But through Jesus you name us as your children. Help us to live in honor of your name. Amen.

## HOSEA'S LOVE STORY

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

Gomer was a woman with a questionable reputation. Nevertheless, Hosea obeyed God's command, and they married. But their marriage soon faltered. Gomer, a promiscuous woman, left Hosea for other men, just as Israel had left the Lord for other gods.

What's a betrayed spouse to do? God tells Hosea to do the unthinkable: "Show your love to your wife again." Gomer had humiliated Hosea by pursuing prostitution and empty promises of love from other men. But Hosea paid to bring Gomer back. And as they began their renewed life together, Hosea insisted on a renewed pledge of faithfulness.

An unlikely story? Maybe. But it's *our* story! The world whispers its seductive promises to us: "Money brings happiness." "Thin means beautiful." "Every-

one's doing it!" Like a wayward spouse, we chase false promises, but we soon find we are enslaved by destructive lies.

The glorious news of the gospel is that God takes extreme steps to redeem us. Hosea bought his wife's freedom with fifteen pieces of silver, but God has bought our freedom with the blood of his own Son! Because he has redeemed us, he calls us into a renewed relationship of adoration and obedience.

What are we doing to show our gratitude to God for all he has done?

Father, you have delivered us from the power of sin and death. We give you all thanks and praise! Teach us to live each day in faithful obedience to your Word. Amen.

## OUR COMPASSIONATE FATHER

*"My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused."*

—Hosea 11:8

Earlier in the book of Hosea, God compares Israel to a wayward wife. In chapter 11 God introduces a new metaphor, the picture of a heartsick father grieving over his child's rebellion. It's as though God is looking at a photo album, remembering earlier, better days. God had delivered Israel from Egypt. God had led Israel through many tumultuous years. But Israel wearied of God's love and struggled to break free from the Lord.

God knows that a terrible future also awaits his child, Israel, if they do not repent—and he knows they will not. They will continue down the road of self-destruction till they are taken captive by other nations and their cities are destroyed. God will allow this because of their disobedience.

But then the message changes, because God is also compassion-

ate. God won't allow his child to be utterly destroyed. He resolves not to carry out the punishment to its full extent. God will not cast off his child forever.

How can God move beyond judgment to grace? He offers his Son, Jesus, to take the punishment for Israel, which now includes all who believe. Jesus takes the full punishment for people's sin. But through his obedience, we receive God's compassion.

If you have been away from God, come home today. Your Father will receive you!

Father, we don't deserve your compassion, but because of Jesus, you show us wonderful grace. Help us to live in gratitude to you. Amen.

## GOD'S GARDEN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

*"I will be like the dew to Israel; he will blossom like a lily."*

—Hosea 14:5

I had done something wrong, and I was in trouble. I've long forgotten what it was, but I'll always remember what happened after my father finished disciplining me. As he hugged me, he told me that he still loved me—and always would. Those words were deeply comforting.

Hosea 14 speaks the same comforting words to God's rebellious children. Israel's sin had led to their downfall. Like a wayward wife and a rebellious child, Israel had severed its relationship with God. Instead of relying on God, Israel sought peace through political alliances with Assyria. The people trusted in military strength for safety. They worshiped handmade idols instead of God.

Now the punishment has passed, and God is calling his child back. Even better, God promises to heal wayward hearts.

Like Israel, our hearts are prone to wander from God. But when we believe in Jesus, God changes us so that we are able to love and serve him wholeheartedly. Like morning dew that waters dry ground, God's love nourishes our hearts so that we become a garden of righteousness. God's love transplants us from a life of restless wandering into the soil of his Word, so that we bring forth a life of obedience.

How is your life producing the fruits of your relationship with God?

Lord, forgive us when we wander from you. Nourish us with your loving compassion. Help us bear fruit in our relationship with you. Amen.

## GOD'S VOICE IN A DISASTER

*Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your ancestors?*  
—Joel 1:2

Israel faced an unprecedented disaster. Swarms of locusts devoured the land, shredded the trees, consumed the vines, and ravaged the wheat fields. Livestock starved, and famine threatened the people.

The prophet Joel reveals that this plague was a result of Israel's unfaithfulness. The Israelites had neglected their worship of God, preferring their own ways to God's way. Because of their sin, God sent this plague to grab their attention and encourage repentance.

In that day, as Joel received the word of the Lord, he knew this disaster was sent as a punishment. But that doesn't mean all disasters are direct punishments from God. Some people interpret natural disasters that way today, but that is not faithful to God's Word. Jesus, God's Word in the flesh (John 1:14), taught

that not every tragedy can be traced to personal disobedience (see Luke 13:5; John 9:1-3). We must remember we live in a world broken because of sin. Sin has corrupted every part of God's good creation, and natural disasters are a result of that corruption.

But the curse of sin—which affects us and all nature—will not last forever (Romans 8:19-21). God sent his Son, Jesus, to pay the price of human sin, and he saves all who repent and believe in him. As Joel declares, the compassionate, loving God promises to restore and bless us, along with his world!

Lord, we grieve that sin has broken your good creation. Help us to live faithfully for you in the hope of all restoration. In Jesus, Amen.

## THE DAY OF THE LORD

*"Afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people."*

—Joel 2:28

The promised land had become a wasteland. The invasion of locusts had devoured everything—wheat fields, grapevines, pastureland. Bread ovens sat cold, grain bins empty, and winepresses idle. Joel said this was God's rebuke for sin, and he called Israel to repent.

Next we hear a prophecy about the future. God promises that when Israel returns to him, he will lift the curse. The fields will flourish again. The grapevines will sag under clusters of new grapes. The temple will be alive with worship. God will revive his relationship with his people! And the great gift that will bring all these blessings to God's people is God's gift of himself—his Spirit!

We share in this hope. The Bible tells us that in ourselves we are dead in sin. We do not desire to love or serve God. But the Spirit of God saturates our soul,

creating faith and leading us to "praise the name of the Lord."

When we believe in Jesus, the curse of our sin is removed. Not only that, but the Holy Spirit also produces fruit in our life. As the Holy Spirit drenches our soul, we come alive in the life Jesus wants from us. Our lives produce a crop of spiritual fruit! We show patience with others. We are filled with compassion for those in need. We are eager to see others come to know the Lord.

How is the Spirit bringing you alive today?

Holy Spirit, thank you for your life-giving work! Bring us to life each day so that we will produce the fruit you desire from us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## IS YOUR GOD A KITTEN OR A LION?

*“The Lord roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem.”*

—Amos 1:2

Do you picture God as a kitten or a lion?

Kittens are tame and playful; lions terrify us. Many of us prefer to imagine God as tame and not too demanding. The idea of God as a lion—fierce and overpowering—is not how we prefer to think of God.

Israel pictured God as more of a kitten than a lion: soft on sin and indifferent to injustice. As a result, the wealthy mistreated the poor. The justice system favored the rich. The wicked thrived while the righteous suffered. And Israel acted as though God didn't care.

Amos warns Israel that God is on the prowl, and, like a lion, he will roar in judgment against sin. At first, Amos speaks about judgment on the nations around Israel (see Amos 1:3-2:5), and the people of Israel would have

nodded in approval about this punishment for their enemies. But then Amos warns Israel that they too are the target of God's judgment. God the Lion was going to punish his people for their sin and injustice.

In time, God roared in judgment. At the cross, God roared in judgment against all our sin. Yet God came not only as a Lion but also as a Lamb. God sent Jesus as the sacrificial Lamb to carry our sin. In Christ, we see God's hatred for sin and his love for sinners.

Let's give thanks to him today!

O God, you hate our sin. Forgive us when we fall short. Thank you for providing the Lamb who takes away our sin! Help us to hate our sin and grow in your grace. Amen.

## RIPE FOR PICKING

*"The time is ripe for my people Israel; I will spare them no longer."*  
—Amos 8:2

A self-important Sunday school teacher hoped to impress his students with his piety. "Do you know why people call me a Christian?" he asked. After a moment of silence, a voice piped up: "Maybe because they don't know you yet!" That's the risk of calling yourself a Christian. People watch to see if your actions match your faith.

Israel's actions didn't match its faith, so God warned Amos in a vision that Israel would be judged. Usually a basket of fruit was a symbol of life's blessings: good food, celebration, fulfilled promises, and hope for the future. Who can resist fresh peaches or blueberries?

But in this vision the fruit basket was a warning: Israel was ripe for judgment. They said they believed in God, but their actions didn't show it. The temple was full of worshipers, but the

people were counting the minutes till they could go back to making money—often by cheating others. Israel observed religious holidays, but their minds dreamed of ways to sell less and charge more.

Israel had forgotten that they were to reflect God's compassion and care for others. We need to remember that too. We are saved in order to do good, to follow Jesus' example of showing love and compassion everywhere.

How will you show evidence of your faith today?

Lord, it is easy for us to profess our faith in you, but then also to ignore people in need around us. Forgive our hypocrisy, and help us to show the grace you have shown us. Amen.

## SIBLING RIVALRY

*And the kingdom will be the LORD'S.*

—Obadiah 21

Israel lived with sibling rivalry. The conflict began in Rebekah's womb, as her twins, Jacob and Esau, wrestled one another (Genesis 25:22). As the brothers grew, they lived in tension—even hatred—with each other (Genesis 27).

Each brother fathered a nation. Jacob fathered the Israelites, and Esau the Edomites. The two nations lived as enemies. When Israel suffered, Edom delighted. When Israel was weak, Edom attacked. And when Israel was overtaken by enemy nations, Edom gloated.

Through the prophet Obadiah the Lord promised that Israel would rise again, and Edom would not claim ultimate victory. In fact, God would punish Edom for their mistreatment of Israel, and he would vindicate Israel. Justice would prevail!

This promise is realized in Christ. When Jesus was born, King Herod, an Edomite (Idumean), tried to kill Jesus, an Israelite. But God preserved Jesus, and Herod soon died (Matthew 2). Then eventually at the cross, Jesus defeated the powers of sin and death that hold sway over all the kingdoms of this world.

We too live in conflict with the kingdoms of this world. We struggle with sin and its effects, but we know that in Jesus, God has already won the victory! Sin may seem to triumph at times, but sin and darkness will not prevail because "the kingdom will be the LORD'S."

All powerful God, comfort us with the assurance of your victory, and keep us strong in the face of adversity. In Jesus, Amen.

## “CHOSEN PEOPLE” SYNDROME

*“Go to the great city Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”* —Jonah 1:2

Do you have “chosen people” syndrome? Symptoms include keeping quiet about your faith, little concern for people who don’t know Jesus, and a notion that God cares only about believers. Jonah had a classic case of this syndrome. God sent him to Nineveh—a violent, immoral city—but he wanted nothing to do with those people!

Jonah’s response was deliberate disobedience. He boarded a ship headed in the opposite direction to escape God’s call. Soon storm clouds formed, winds blew, and rain pelted down. While Jonah slept below deck, the sailors prayed to their (false) gods. They at least understood that they needed help, while Jonah did not.

After learning (from the Lord) that Jonah was responsible for the storm, the sailors demanded an answer from him. Then

finally Jonah shared his faith: “I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” God later confirmed this truth by quieting the storm after they threw Jonah overboard. In spite of Jonah, God made sure that he became known to these sailors.

Do you share God’s desire? Are you concerned for people who do not know Jesus, the Lord of heaven and earth? God has placed you in your community, your workplace, your school to be his witness. Will you tell others the good news of God’s love?

Lord, we are often reluctant to share your good news with others. Change us and guide us to share your compassion for the world. Amen.

## WHEN LIFE IS THE PITS

*“Salvation comes from the LORD.”*

—Jonah 2:9

People have said, “Be careful what you wish for; you just might get it!” Jonah might have felt that way. Jonah tried to run away from God, and now he was plunged into “the deep,” believed to be “the realm of the dead” in those times, where you were totally cut off from life, separated even from God. But as Jonah sank into the dark, stormy sea, God sent a fish to swallow him whole.

Jonah describes the ordeal this way: “From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help.” Realizing that he didn’t really want to be separated from God, Jonah called for help, and the Lord listened to his cry.

Humanly speaking, Jonah’s life was over when he sank in the stormy sea. Still, Jonah cried out to God. And God heard! God wasn’t finished with Jonah, so God did the “impossible”—he

brought Jonah up from the pit. God delivered Jonah from death’s grip. Jonah thus closed his psalm with confidence: “Salvation comes from the LORD.”

Perhaps you are running from God, and, like Jonah, you’re learning that apart from God you experience no real life at all, only a descent into despair. The good news is that when we believe in Jesus, God raises us up from spiritual death and draws us into a living and loving relationship with him. We too can joyfully declare, “Salvation comes from the LORD”!

God, we often imagine we are better off without you. Forgive us our pride, and help us to live each day in the newness of life you have given us. In Jesus, Amen.

## THE GOD OF SECOND CHANCES

*"Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."* —Jonah 3:9

Has Jonah learned his lesson?

After three days in the sour belly of a fish, Jonah is vomited onto dry land, and God gives him a second chance. God repeats his orders to preach to the people of Nineveh.

This time Jonah obeys, and he begins to preach. But something is puzzling. Something seems wrong. Jonah's short sermon speaks only of judgment. There is no word of hope, no offer of forgiveness, no call for repentance. The same Jonah who has tasted God's grace now has no grace to offer Nineveh.

Still, in spite of Jonah's lack of effort, the entire city repents! Everyone, from the children playing in the streets to the king in the palace, repents of their sin and pleads for God's mercy.

So the Word of God and his compassion shines through.

And when he sees Nineveh's sorrow, God recognizes their repentance and spares the city. Our God is a God of grace!

This is great news for us all. When we repent and put our trust in Jesus, God withholds the judgment that is rightfully ours. And this compassion ought to change our attitude toward others so that we show mercy and compassion instead of being quick to judge.

Lord God, we know we deserve your judgment, but through Jesus we know your great love. When we see others hurting, help us to treat them with your compassion and love. Amen.

## LOVING “THOSE PEOPLE”

*“Should I not have concern for the great city . . . ?”*

—Jonah 4:11

Who are the people that come to mind when you think of sinners? For Jonah, Nineveh was full of “those people.” Immoral, sinful, rebellious people—people who certainly didn’t deserve God’s grace.

But that’s the odd thing about grace. By its very definition, grace is for undeserving people. Grace is compassion for people who don’t deserve mercy.

When God showed mercy to Jonah, Jonah praised God for his goodness. But when God showed mercy to Nineveh, Jonah got angry with God for going soft on sin. In Jonah’s mind, forgiveness was for worthy people—not for “those people.”

But while Jonah sits on a hill outside Nineveh, God causes a plant to grow and then die. Jonah insists that he has a right to be angry about losing his plant,

and that’s when God makes his point. Jonah has more concern for a plant than for a city full of lost souls.

The book of Jonah ends with a piercing question: “Should I not have concern for the great city . . . ?”

This is a question for all of us. We all know some of “those people”—people who have made a mess of their lives, people who don’t deserve God’s love. Should we not be concerned about them?

Gracious and compassionate God, we treasure your mercy for ourselves, yet we are often reluctant to share your concern for others. Help us to share your compassion for all who are lost. Amen.

## GOD IN THE WORKING WORLD

*Woe to those who plan iniquity . . . because it is in their power to do it.*  
—Micah 2:1

On the surface, Israel seemed to be successful. She was wealthy and prosperous. But beneath the glamorous exterior, spiritual problems threatened to destroy God's people. Love of money, desire for wealth, and hunger for power led to corruption. The wealthy and powerful made shady real-estate deals, seizing land from the poor. When a widow couldn't pay her rent, she was evicted mercilessly, without concern for her well-being. When a man couldn't pay his debt, his creditor stripped him of his belongings and sent him to prison.

Worst of all, the guilty were God's people. On the Sabbath, they worshiped at the temple, listening to the Scriptures and saying their prayers. But what they did on the Sabbath made no difference in what they did the rest of the week. God cares

how we practice our faith in daily life.

The prophet Micah promised that God would gather his people like sheep in a pen. And, in time, Jesus came to be our Shepherd-King! (See John 10.) He forgives our sins, and he transforms us by his Holy Spirit so that we are able to reflect God's character in boardrooms, schoolrooms, banks, farms, factories, and wherever else God calls us to serve.

How does your worship on Sunday shape the way you do your work on Monday?

Jesus, our good shepherd, tend and care for us so that we will reflect your nature in all you call us to do. Keep us from greed and idolatry that threaten to destroy us. Amen.

**TAKE COURAGE!**

*"Out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel."*

—Micah 5:2

Great leaders usually come from great places. They graduate from Harvard or Stanford or West Point or Oxford. We don't usually expect greatness to rise from little villages. But God works in surprising ways.

Israel was in crisis. As the Assyrian army closed in, Micah warned that Israel's king would be struck on the cheek—an act of humiliation. Destruction was certain, and Israel was desperate for a savior.

Micah then says that a new ruler would rise from, of all places, the small town of Bethlehem. Israel would suffer for a time and experience the "labor pains" of defeat. Yet the pain of defeat would give birth to victory! God would send a leader to deliver his people, and this leader would tend them like a shepherd.

In time, God sent the good shepherd, Jesus. He was born

in Bethlehem, and he grew up to be the perfect shepherd of God's people. He was struck on the cheek for our guilt and humiliated for our sin and shame. But through his death on the cross he destroyed our enemy! He saved us from the curse of sin and death.

Jesus now shepherds us "in the strength of the Lord." When we face opposition and struggles in this world, we can take comfort from Jesus' promises. He will care for us, lead us, and carry us through our struggles. And we can find rest in him.

*"Savior, like a shepherd lead us." Help us to look to you for our peace and security. May we trust in your guidance and rest in your peace. In your name, Amen.*

**“DADDY, I NEED HELP!”**

*You will again have compassion on us . . . .*

—Micah 7:19

Our three-year-old daughter is fiercely independent. As she struggles to put on a shirt or carry an armful of dishes, she refuses help: “No, Daddy, I can do it myself!” Minutes later, she often comes to me with shirt-sleeves twisted up, or with the announcement that a plate of food has fallen to the floor, pleading, “Daddy, I need help!”

We’re all like that. We like to believe we can do it ourselves. In the process, we often resist God’s will for our lives.

For example, Israel demanded a king so that they could be like “all the other nations” (1 Samuel 8:5). God warned that having a king was not in their best interests, but Israel insisted. Unfortunately most of Israel’s kings led the people astray. They promoted idol worship and injustice, greed and immorality.

Eventually Israel collapsed, and they suffered God’s judgment.

But Micah interceded for God’s people. He asked God to restore his sinful people and draw them back to himself. And God promised he would have compassion on them and “tread [their] sins underfoot.”

What good news! In Jesus, God has done that. Maybe you’ve tried to do it yourself. Maybe you’ve tried to live life your own way—and you’ve made a mess. God heals and restores fallen people! In what ways do you need to trust in your Father’s will?

Father, we often try to do things our own way, and we make a mess of our lives. Forgive us our pride, and help us to submit to your will for our lives. In Jesus, Amen.

## WHAT GOD REALLY WANTS

*He has shown all you people what is good. . . . To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.—Micah 6:8*

The last day of school was judgment day. Report cards were handed out, and I would be summoned before my parents to answer for my academic performance. How was I doing? Had I improved? What did I need to work on?

Micah 6 describes Israel's judgment day. God summons Israel into his cosmic courtroom to answer for their actions. God recites all he has done for his people. He brought them out of slavery in Egypt and led them through the desert. He gave them victory over their enemies and gave them prosperity in Canaan. Yet Israel had broken God's covenant. They had neglected the poor and needy. They had ignored justice. They had failed to seek God in humility.

Israel tried on her own to make things right with God. Did God want more sacrifices and burnt

offerings? Did he want more religion? No! God wanted hearts that loved him and reflected his mercy toward people in need. God desired hearts of devotion that produced obedient living.

Today the "heart transplant" we need comes through faith in Jesus Christ. When we believe in Jesus, God changes our hearts so that we share his own heart of mercy for people who are downtrodden. He shapes us so that we seek to do what is right and just in this world.

How will you love mercy, act justly, and walk humbly with your God today?

Lord, may our faith produce a life of joyful obedience. Teach us to walk faithfully with you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## BEAUTIFUL FEET, BEAUTIFUL MESSAGE

*"Look . . . the feet of one who brings good news, who proclaims peace!"*  
—Nahum 1:15

Remember Nineveh? Remember Jonah? In the Bible book that bears his name, God rebukes Jonah for not wanting to share God's mercy with Nineveh. Even though Jonah was a reluctant missionary, the whole city of Nineveh repented!

But Nineveh fell back into its sinful ways. Again they became an oppressive, evil nation, and by the time of Nahum, they had made life miserable for God's people.

But Nahum had a message of good news for Judah: God had seen his people suffer at the hand of Nineveh, and now he would set them free. Nineveh would be destroyed. Their idols would be torn down, their city walls reduced to rubble, and their temples burned to ashes. And God's people would be restored. God tells his people, "Celebrate your festivals . . .

and fulfill your vows." Religious and family life for Judah would resume because God would defeat their enemies. That truly was good news!

That good news is a reminder for us too. God has defeated the kingdom of Satan and has released this world from sin's grip. As hearts submit to Jesus, racism, hatred, greed, and all other evils lose their power.

When addiction or temptation or sin seem overpowering, rejoice and be strong! The Prince of Peace releases us from the grip of Satan's kingdom.

King of peace, sin disrupts so much of this world. But you bring renewal and restoration! Help us to seek your peace wherever we see brokenness. Amen.

## WHEN GOOD FOLKS FINISH LAST

*How long, LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen?*

—Habakkuk 1:2

Does God notice what is going on in the world? Does he see when a bomb blows up a crowded marketplace? Is he aware of the AIDS epidemic sweeping across a continent? Does God take note of battered women and hungry children in our communities?

Habakkuk demanded answers to questions like these. Violent crime was on the rise in Judah, and those in power were paid to look the other way. Landlords threw a widow with young children out on the streets when she couldn't pay her rent. The good suffered while evildoers prospered.

Where was God? Did God care? God's answers to Habakkuk's questions weren't quite what Habakkuk expected. Yes, the evildoers of Judah would be punished. But it would happen as God sent the brutal Babylonians to destroy Judah. God would use

Judah's enemies to bring justice on his own people.

Habakkuk had to learn about the complexities of God's work in the world. We often ponder the perplexing ways of God. But, like Habakkuk, we must learn that we are not first asked to figure out God's mysteries. Instead, we are asked to be faithful (Habakkuk 2:4).

There are no simple answers to the troubles of our world. Yet we can trust that God is sovereign. In Jesus, he has defeated sin, and he will prevail! When we are troubled by what happens in our world, let us live by faith that God is in control.

Lord, we grieve over pain and suffering in the world around us. We don't always understand, but help us to live by faith. Amen.

## TRUSTING GOD WHEN LIFE IS BARREN

*Though the fig tree does not bud . . . and the fields produce no food . . . I will be joyful in God my Savior.*

—Habakkuk 3:17-18

Sometimes life is a wilderness. You could lose your job. You could develop cancer. Your marriage could fall apart. In dry and barren seasons, our trust in God can face heavy attacks.

Why does God allow such things to happen to us? Why do good people suffer while sinful people seemingly go through life without a scratch?

Habakkuk lived in a moral and spiritual wilderness. Israel had fallen away from God. Injustice ruled society, and corruption eroded the government. Soon God would punish Israel for their sin by allowing the Babylonians to conquer them. Their land would go to waste. The fig tree would no longer bloom, fields would lie fallow, and grapes would rot on the vine.

Israel's suffering was a consequence of their disobedience.

Likewise, all of the pains and heartaches in our world are effects of sin. Yet Habakkuk learned that he could always trust in God because God is faithful even when his people are not.

Maybe you have failed in some part of your life. Maybe you're struggling to try to hold things together. Take comfort! Even when life is a wilderness, God never fails his people. On the cross, Jesus conquered the root cause of the world's trouble—sin. Today he promises that he will never leave or forsake you. Trust in him, and he will strengthen you.

Sovereign God, when we walk through the wilderness of life, help us to find joy in your salvation. Remind us that we belong to you, and strengthen our faith. In Jesus, Amen.

**ANY DAY NOW!**

*The great day of the LORD is near—near and coming quickly.*

—Zephaniah 1:14

It was the long-awaited moment when everything would be put right in the world. On “the day of the LORD” God would finally destroy Israel’s enemies. At last justice would come. After years of oppression, Israel would watch their enemies melt before God’s anger.

Zephaniah now proclaimed that the day of the Lord was “near and coming quickly.” The prophet piled up pictures of distress and trouble to illustrate the terror of this day. When God released his anger, darkness and chaos would overtake the created world.

But Judah would also hear God’s verdict on their sin. Judah believed they were immune to judgment, but the Lord said they too deserved to be punished.

The Bible tells us that another day of the Lord is yet to come.

Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead—and that includes you and me.

On that day, our silver or gold will be unable to save us. All of our accomplishments and wealth will count for nothing. But the gospel assures us that Jesus has taken God’s judgment for our sin upon himself. If we believe in him, the day of the Lord will be a day to share in God’s victory over sin and darkness.

Are you ready?

Lord, help us to be ready for your return. Test our hearts, and reveal to us if we are placing our hope in things that will not last. May your return be a day of victory for us! Amen.

## REST FOR RESTLESS PEOPLE

*"You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough."*  
—Haggai 1:6

Our son is restless! Derek will enjoy playing with a game only for a few moments before growing dissatisfied and moving on to something else.

Judah was also restless. After seventy years in exile, they began a new life in their old land. But life didn't go as they hoped. They labored in the fields but had few crops to show for it. They ate and drank, but were never satisfied.

The prophet Haggai explains that Judah's restlessness had a spiritual cause. They had moved back into the promised land and rebuilt their homes and businesses, but they procrastinated with rebuilding the temple. They put off worship until they "got around to it." Since the people neglected their relationship with God, God withheld his blessings.

There are many restless people today. They search for satisfaction in their work, their families, their accomplishments, or a life of moral excellence. These may be good things, but people eventually find that nothing satisfies until they have a right relationship with God.

Jesus invites us to find rest in him. When we trust in him, he promises to meet our deepest needs. He forgives our sins and assures us that he will care for us, protect us, lead us, and guide us.

Have you found rest in Jesus?

Father, when we are tempted to look for satisfaction in this world, help us to find our rest in you. Help us to tend our relationship with you so that we may enjoy the full life you promise. Amen.

## GLORY DAYS

*"My Spirit remains among you. Do not fear."*

—Haggai 2:5

I have great memories of growing up in Edmonton, Alberta, during the glory days of the Edmonton Oilers hockey team. Do you remember your glory days? Maybe it was your season as a star quarterback, or those years when you were at the height of your career. The problem with glory days is that nothing else can measure up. When we dwell on past glory, we are not satisfied with the present.

Judah longed for their glory days. After seventy years in exile, they had returned to their old land to rebuild. But after a month of construction on the temple, work ground to a halt. The framework of the new temple paled in comparison to the memory of the old temple. Old-timers remembered how things used to be, and they doubted that this new temple would measure up. Could God

live in such a meager dwelling? Yes! God assured his people that his presence is not dictated by outward appearance.

That's true today as well. We as Jesus' followers are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). Regardless of how low we might feel about ourselves, we are indwelt with God's Spirit to display God's glory in worship, service, and fellowship.

How is God's presence apparent in your life?

Glorious God, sometimes we look for your presence only in beautiful sanctuaries. We forget we are your temple! Help us to make known your glorious presence to a hurting world. In Jesus, Amen.

## THE GIFT OF A SECOND CHANCE

*“Return to me . . . and I will return to you.”*

—Zechariah 1:3

The clock counted down to midnight, and the partygoers cheered the beginning of a new year. While everyone was enjoying themselves, one woman engaged in a moment of self-reflection. “Everyone needs a second chance,” she said.

She was right. We’ve all spoken words we want to take back. We’ve made decisions that we wish we could change. Maybe we look back over our life and are filled with regrets.

God promises a second chance! Zechariah ministered to God’s people as they restarted life in the promised land. He warned the people that if they wanted to thrive in the land, they had to be careful not to repeat the mistakes of their ancestors. So Zechariah called God’s people to a life of repentance. He urged them to renew their commitment to God and his

Word. When Israel turned back to God, they would enjoy a renewed relationship with him!

God extends his promise to us as well. We have all failed in the past, but God assures us that repentance brings renewal. When we turn from our sin and look to Christ, God forgives us and gives us a new beginning. We begin to enjoy the presence of God in our life, and we begin to live the way God desires.

Have you discovered the joy that comes from beginning again with God?

God, forgive us when we insist on doing things our own way. Lead us out of our sin and into lives that are pleasing to you. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

## GOD'S DRESS CODE

*"See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put fine garments on you."*  
—Zechariah 3:4

While growing up, I sometimes thought God had a dress code. Wearing our "Sunday best" to church was mandatory, and if we tried to get away with wearing something else, Mom or Dad would ask, "You don't think you're wearing *that* to church, do you?"

It appears in our text that Joshua the high priest is violating God's dress code. Actually Joshua's tattered garments were symbolic of Israel's fallen condition before God. Zechariah the prophet envisions Joshua—and all Israel—standing before God, stained with sin and guilt. Satan, the accuser, delights in reminding Israel of her failures and shortcomings. But God is merciful! He rebukes Satan and promises to clothe Joshua—and Israel—in the clean clothes of God's perfect righteousness.

In Jesus, God has done this for us. On our own, we stand before God wearing tattered rags. We aren't fit for God's presence. Satan loves to remind us of that. He points out all of the ways we haven't loved others. He reminds us of past failures. He tells us that God will give up on us.

But when we believe in Jesus, it's as though God clothes us in the finest garments. He dresses us in the perfect obedience of Jesus and helps us to wear the new garments of our salvation. Let's thank God for clean clothes!

Lord God, on our own, we wear stained and tattered clothing. Thank you for clothing us in Christ. Help us each day to clothe ourselves with the garments of your salvation. Amen.

## URBAN RENEWAL

*"I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem."*

—Zechariah 8:3

During my training to become a pastor, my wife and I lived for a year in Gary, Indiana, learning about urban ministry. We encountered many of the troubles plaguing cities around the country: poverty, homelessness, broken families. I came to understand how society's ills are symptoms of our sinful hearts. Hunger, for example, can result from poor stewardship or from indifference on the part of those who have more than enough. Sin leads to societal decay.

This was true for the city of Jerusalem. For years, Judah had turned their backs on God. So God allowed his people to be taken over by invaders. And the city became a desolate ruin.

But then God promised urban renewal! God would forgive his rebellious children, and his presence would return to Jerusalem. The city would come alive with

sounds of laughter as children played and the Lord enjoyed renewed fellowship with his people.

This is our hope too. Jesus has restored our relationship with God, and one day we will live in the New Jerusalem with the Lord himself (Revelation 21:1-5). In the meantime, we seek his kingdom by showing that sinful people find forgiveness in Jesus. As God changes sinful hearts, our communities experience renewal.

What can you do to seek God's kingdom in your neighborhood today?

Lord, help us to live for you in our cities and towns so that our neighbors may experience your healing mercy. May your kingdom come! Amen.

## THE WRONG KIND OF KING

*See, your king comes to you . . . lowly and riding on a donkey.*

—Zechariah 9:9

Political campaigns seem unending. Would-be candidates tour their areas, appear on talk shows, and make their opinions known. We hear of promises to fix the economy, to bring world peace, and to cure society's ills. During a time of economic trouble or global conflict, these promises inspire hope—even if they are unrealistic.

The people of Judah were living in a time of uncertainty and fear. Their enemies were a terrifying threat. The economy was in shambles. Worst of all, Judah had fallen away from God; they were in spiritual decay. The future looked bleak.

But suddenly the prophet Zechariah proclaimed good news. God would send a king to rule his people, to restore their land, and to destroy their enemies. Peace and prosperity would return!

Hundreds of years later, that King made his royal entrance into Jerusalem. He did not ride in a chariot or on a warhorse, as one might expect. He rode a donkey.

Jesus entered this world as a king, but he did not rule by making political treaties or by military conquest. Jesus came to bring us peace by destroying Satan's kingdom and releasing us from the grip of sin.

Jesus has come to rule our lives as our eternal King! Are you submitting your life to his reign?

Lord, we confess that it's easier for us to seek our own ambitions in life. Help us to submit our life to King Jesus, and to seek his rule in all parts of our life. Amen.

## GOD DOES NOT PLAY FAVORITES

*"I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated."*

—Malachi 1:3

What does God mean by saying, "I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated"?

A little insight from history can help. The people in that day would have recognized this statement as a common legal formula a father would use to declare which son would inherit the family property. It didn't mean he hated the other son; it simply meant he favored one (usually the eldest) with the greater share of the inheritance.

But from the story of Esau and Jacob we know that Esau was the elder brother and Jacob (by deception) received the blessing that would have been Esau's. God had foretold this result, and he later called Jacob (Israel) to be the favored nation from whom the Savior of the world, Jesus, would come. By choosing Jacob, God showed that his mercy and favor were not

based on human birthright or merit (see Genesis 25; 27-28).

Neither Jacob nor Esau deserved God's favor, and history bore that out. The descendants of both brothers constantly followed their own ways. They also fought bitterly against each other. But while Esau's descendants (Edom) continued their own way, God always called Jacob (Israel) back, so that the Savior could eventually come from Jacob, as promised.

Let's praise God that he did, so that all of us from all nations could receive the offer of salvation! God loves us, just as he told the people through Malachi, and he wants us to turn from our own ways to follow him faithfully, in Christ.

O God, help us to follow you, trusting in your love.  
Through Jesus, Amen.

## WHOLEHEARTED WORSHIP

*"If I am a father, where is the honor due me?"*

—Malachi 1:6

Comfort often breeds complacency. When the church is persecuted and threatened, it often grows in strength and number. But when believers are safe and secure, the result is often lukewarm Christianity. In North America, a majority of people claim to be spiritual. But a shrinking number of people are connected with a church, and fewer hold to their convictions.

Israel had become complacent. A generation after returning to the promised land, Israel had fallen into old habits. Their cities had been repaired and the temple rebuilt, but now Israel's hearts were growing hard again. They were satisfied with going through the motions of religion. They brought defiled and diseased animals to the altar—offerings that they would not even consider bringing to human dignitaries!

Israel was complacent because they had lost sight of God's character. They believed that a holy God could be satisfied with half-hearted devotion. Malachi warned the people that God was not pleased with lukewarm devotion and imperfect sacrifices.

Thankfully we have a priest who offers the perfect sacrifice on our behalf! Jesus offers himself as the complete, full sacrifice as payment for our sins. And in response we offer ourselves as offerings of gratitude to him. How are you offering your life in thanks for what God has done?

Father, forgive us when our devotion to you is lukewarm. Kindle a burning desire in our hearts to serve you with every part of our being! Amen.

## ROBBING GOD

*“Test me . . . and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing . . . .” —Malachi 3:10*

A man stormed heaven’s throne room, wearing a ski mask over his face. Coming up to God, he demanded, “Give me everything you have!”

Sound absurd? Yes. And yet Malachi says that was how Israel was behaving. When it came time to bring offerings to the temple, Israel was stingy. The people brought offerings, but only the bare minimum. The farmers offered grain and wheat, but only what was left after they had taken what they wanted for themselves. Israel lived as though everything belonged to them. They acted as though they were free to decide for themselves how much to give to God and what they could use for themselves. That was sin!

The Bible tells us that everything belongs to God. The grain, the cattle, our money, our homes,

our possessions—all are God’s gifts to us, and we are to use everything for his glory. In Christ, God has given us everything. He sacrificed his only Son to make us his children. God didn’t hold back what is most precious to him! And, in response, we are to be generous with everything that we have.

Giving is not something we do to secure God’s blessings. It is a response to God’s most generous gift to us. How will you be generous with all God has given to you for his glory?

Gracious God, sometimes we live as though we own everything we have. Remind us again and again of your supreme generosity so that we too will be generous. In Jesus, Amen.

## AN UNCERTAIN ENDING

*“Remember the law of my servant Moses . . . .”*

—Malachi 4:4

My wife often skips ahead to read the end of a novel. She needs to know how things turn out for the hero. More often than not, the story ends positively, and her fears are allayed.

Today we’ve read the end of the Old Testament, but this ending doesn’t sound so encouraging. For hundreds of years, God’s people have repeated a cycle of obedience, disobedience, punishment, repentance, and restoration. And now, as the curtain falls on the Old Testament, God’s people are again turning away from God, and again God warns that judgment will follow.

But judgment is never the last word! Four hundred years after Malachi, John the Baptist came, and he called the people to turn their hearts back to God (see Matthew 3:1-2; 11:11-15). John prepared the world for the coming of Jesus. And Jesus came

to do what Israel couldn’t do—and what we cannot do on our own. Jesus lived the life of perfect obedience, fulfilling the law in our place (Matthew 5:17-20) to reconcile us with God.

One day Jesus will return. All of creation will be judged, and only those who believe in Jesus will escape punishment. Are you ready? God calls us to prepare for his return by living in thankful obedience. Let’s prepare for Jesus’ return by dedicating ourselves to him and committing to a life of gratitude for his great salvation.

Lord Jesus, we look forward to seeing you face to face! Strengthen our hope in your coming, and help us to prepare for your return. In your name, Amen.

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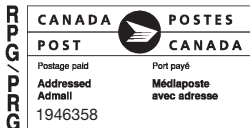
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