



Jan/Feb 2012

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew

## ABIDING IN CHRIST

ALSO: LEARNING FROM THE CHURCH WORLDWIDE

Dear Friends,

About this time of year, garden catalogues are beginning to arrive in my mailbox. It's interesting to page through them, noticing especially the new varieties of vegetables and flowers.

The real gardener in our family is my wife, Edie. I'm the assistant, whose specialty is digging holes, laying down groundcover, and moving sprinklers. When it comes to deciding on what to plant—that's Edie's call. And her research pays dividends in a garden that looks great from spring to fall.

Our devotions for January and February also move us into the realm of gardening—in terms of our personal lives. We'll begin the new year by exploring the ways in which our connection with Jesus, the "true vine," produces remarkable spiritual fruit in our lives. The Spirit empowers us to display the multifaceted love of God as we bear the fruit of Christlike-ness.

Then, in February, we'll explore spiritual fruit from a little different perspective. In my work with Back to God Ministries International, I've had wonderful experiences of learning from the church worldwide. My experiences have deepened and broadened my understanding and practice of the Christian faith. I'd like to share some of the personal "fruit" I've experienced from this work.

My prayer is that 2012 will be a spiritually prosperous year for you—as you grow in grace, bear the fruit of Christian service, and make new discoveries regarding the incredible richness of the gospel.

In Christ's service,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bob Hayspink". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Bob



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**“Abiding in Christ”**  
**Peter Hoytema**



**“Learning from the  
Church Worldwide”**  
**Robert Heerspink**

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**re** FRAME MEDIA

# this month

## Abiding in Christ

**Peter Hoytema**

As we enter a new year, it's timely that we reflect on our relationship with the Lord and consider how we can grow stronger in him. Jesus loved to paint pictures with words, and in John 15 he compares the relationship between believers and himself to that of branches and a vine.

Throughout this month, we'll explore this imagery that gets to the heart of our relationship with Jesus. We'll especially focus on the fruit of the Spirit, which demonstrates God's gracious presence in our lives and our desire to grow as fruitful followers of Jesus. Through it all, may we savor the fruit of the Holy Spirit's work and anticipate experiencing the spiritual growth that Jesus promised will take place in the lives of his disciples!

*Peter Hoytema has been a pastor in the Christian Reformed Church for more than twenty years and has served congregations in Canada and the United States. Currently he is the pastor of Westmount Christian Reformed Church in Strathroy, Ontario. "Fittingly for a pastor," he says, he is married to Grace, with whom he shares the joys of parenting four children.*

## THE BEST RESOLUTION OF ALL

*Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him. . . .—Colossians 2:6-7*

It's a new year! Have you made any resolutions for 2012? At this time of year many people try to change habits and set goals they would like to accomplish. One resolution we would all do well to make this year is to grow in our relationship with Christ.

Most of the time, keeping new year's resolutions requires a lot of energy and commitment on our part. It's no wonder so many of us have a hard time sticking to them! Growth in spiritual matters can seem just as hard at times, but here's the good thing about the resolution to grow in Christ: it involves his work much more than ours.

This doesn't mean that pursuing greater spiritual maturity is easy. As we'll see this month, practicing Christian virtues is rigorous. But all the energy we devote to spiritual growth is ultimately

our response to the primary work of God's grace, and it is evidence of the Holy Spirit's fruitful ministry in our lives.

We've just celebrated Christmas and have once again "received Christ Jesus." This month, I invite you to reflect on how you can "continue to live . . . in him, rooted and built up in him." With the image Jesus uses in John 15 of branches attached to a vine as our guide, let's explore what it means to abide in Christ. And let's do so expecting to see fruit the Holy Spirit will produce!

Dear Lord, thank you for bringing us safely into another year. May we experience lots of spiritual growth in 2012, to your praise and glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## JESUS IS THE TRUE VINE

*You transplanted a vine from Egypt. . . .*

—Psalm 80:8

When Jesus referred to himself as a vine (see John 15:1), he used a metaphor that was understood better by his original audience than by people today. That's because they knew the deep roots of this image in Scripture.

In the Old Testament Scriptures, the nation of Israel was often compared to a vine. We see this in today's Bible reading. When Israel took possession of the promised land, it was as if God planted a choice vine in the fertile soil he had cleared for it. But as Psalm 80 also describes, the vine that initially flourished in the land eventually shriveled and was cut down.

That happened because of the people's disobedience. The prophets record how the demise of God's vineyard broke his heart. In Jeremiah 2:21 God laments, "I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reli-

able stock. How then did you turn against me into a corrupt, wild vine?" And Isaiah 5:1-7 describes how God would punish "the vineyard . . . of Israel" for producing only bad fruit.

Jesus, however, became "the true vine" (John 15:1). He lived the life of perfect obedience that Israel—and all of us—were supposed to live. And his death is the only thing that restores sinful people to God's original purpose of a fruitful life. The blood he shed on the dead wood of the cross makes the wilderness of our unfaithfulness a fruitful garden again!

Forgive me, Lord, for being unfaithful to you. Draw me close so that I can bear the fruit you created my life to produce. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## FERTILIZER FOR FAITH

*"Leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it."*  
—Luke 13:8

The Bible's original languages sometimes carry important nuances that get lost in translation. Today's Bible reading is a case in point. In Luke 13:8, the steward of a vineyard prevents an unfruitful fig tree from being destroyed by telling the owner to "leave it alone for one more year."

The Greek word translated as "leave it alone" is important in the New Testament. It is also often translated as "forgive."

The tree that did not produce figs for three years was not cut down right away, despite the master's orders—why? Because someone interceded for the fruitless tree. He said to the master, "Forgive."

Does that sound familiar? It's a summary of the entire gospel. Our sin renders us unfruitful and fully deserving of punish-

ment. But in Jesus Christ we see how God's mercy triumphs over judgment (see James 2:13).

In another place in Luke's gospel, Jesus teaches that we "forgive everyone who sins against us" (Luke 11:4). Do you see how Jesus puts the words of the steward into action?

That's the grace of the gospel, offered freely to all. But notice that the fig tree would have to bear fruit eventually, or it would be cut down. Our Master says similarly to us, "Unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Thank you, Lord, for graciously interceding for us. Use us to tell others about your love so that they too can experience the lifesaving power of your forgiveness. In your name we pray. Amen.

## A WHOLE NEW LIFE

*In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope.*

—1 Peter 1:3

At one point in his book *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, C. S. Lewis rejoices over finally being able to forgive someone he had been trying to forgive for over thirty years. That's a long time to work at forgiveness!

Sometimes spiritual progress is slow and steady, and much time is required before fruit appears. At other times spiritual growth can take place all at once. I think especially of people who have a dramatic conversion experience to new life in Christ. Suddenly new life surges as a person is brought into a relationship with Jesus through the unexpected ministry of the Holy Spirit.

In his autobiography, *Just as I Am*, Billy Graham reflects on "The British Crusade" of 1954. One night, two men came supposedly to hear Billy preach, but their sole purpose was to heckle him and disrupt his presentation of

the gospel. But when he invited people to come forward to dedicate their lives to Jesus Christ, something incredible happened: one man turned to the other and said he was going forward! The other man responded by saying he was going too, and then added, "Here's your wallet back—I'm a pickpocket."

Whether new life in Jesus begins suddenly or develops over the course of one's entire lifetime, the goal is the same: to be transformed by the power of the gospel. Has your life been transformed?

Thank you, Lord, for giving us new life. Whether we have lived as Christians for many years or we are just beginning our life in you, help us grow closer to you each day. Amen.

## FRESH FRUIT, NOT FLESH FRUIT

*Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.*  
—Galatians 5:16

When Paul describes the fruit of the Spirit, he contrasts it with “the acts of the flesh.” When we hear that phrase, we might think Paul is talking only about bodily sins, but that is not the case.

Paul identifies attitudes as well as actions that are “of the flesh”—that is, things that are a part of us because of our sinful nature.

In the New Testament, “the flesh” is a summary term that refers to everything in our lives that is hostile to God. The flesh is the natural condition of every unregenerate person.

In his book *Baptism and Fullness* John Stott puts it this way: “The works of the flesh are the deeds we do naturally, when left to our own resources, while the fruit of the Spirit consists of qualities which the Spirit works in us supernaturally.”

Simply comparing the words “acts” and “fruit” can help us understand. Acts are what we do, and fruit is what the Spirit produces.

When we abide in Christ, there can be no such thing as flesh fruit—only fresh fruit, graciously nurtured within us from an external source, the Spirit.

It’s by the ministry of the Holy Spirit that our sinful acts are replaced with his holy fruit.

What fruit has the Spirit produced in you lately?

Thank you, Lord, for delivering us from the power of sin, and for ruling in our lives through the Holy Spirit. Help us to live by the power of your Spirit every day. Amen.

## THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ROOT AND FRUIT

*It is by grace you have been saved . . . not by works, so that no one can boast.*  
—Ephesians 2:8-9

The English politician William Wilberforce is best known for his efforts to end slavery in the British Empire. It was a decades-long struggle, but abolition was finally accomplished.

Wilberforce not only had great determination; he was able to discern spiritual truth. He was perplexed that many who considered themselves Christian supported the slave trade, which he believed was in opposition to Christian faith. In response he wrote *A Practical View of Christianity* to show the danger of making good behavior the basis for salvation.

Can you imagine a politician today calling for social reform by making direct appeals to Christian doctrine? That's what Wilberforce did. He rightly pointed out that good works do not create new life in Jesus; they demonstrate it.

People who consider themselves "good" but do not abide in Christ are placing more trust in their own work than in God's. But the only possible result is nominal Christianity—surface-level goodness without internal renewal. That's why Jesus called the Pharisees, who were undoubtedly very good people, "whitewashed tombs" (Matthew 23:27).

Obedience is the fruit, not the root, of being accepted by God. Work hard at being good, but always remember that your good works "show the incomparable riches of his grace."

Lord, sometimes I forget that the good works I do are the result of your grace. Forgive me for robbing you of your glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.

**STRENGTHENED BY HARDSHIP**

*No discipline seems pleasant . . . . Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness . . . .*

—Hebrews 12:11

My wife is an avid gardener. Early in spring, she plants vegetable seeds in tiny pots indoors, safe from the freezing temperatures outside. The young plants grow until they can be safely transplanted outdoors.

To prepare for their move to the garden, my wife will “harden” the plants. This means that on warm, sunny days she brings them outside for a few hours so that they can slowly adjust to the sun and wind.

This process of hardening reminds me of a biosphere that was designed in Arizona years ago. The idea was to create an indoor environment that had perfect conditions for growing fruit. Scientists expected the trees to produce the best fruit ever seen, but something unanticipated happened: before the fruit fully developed, it fell to the ground. The “ideal” conditions

of the biosphere did not include wind! Without the hardening effect of wind, tree branches were unable to bear the weight of ripening fruit, so they broke.

Today’s Bible reading indicates a parallel in spiritual discipline. When believers experience times of challenge and suffering, those painful realities can yield a “harvest of righteousness.” God doesn’t take delight in our pain, but he does use it for our spiritual benefit. If you are suffering, trust that the Lord will use that to make you a stronger, more fruitful Christian.

Lord, sometimes it’s hard to connect our suffering to your goodness. Give us faith to believe that you can produce fruit in our lives through the difficulties we face. Amen.

## THE PAIN OF PRUNING

*Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.*  
—John 15:2

As I did some research on pruning, I learned that gardeners prune fruit trees for basically two reasons. The first is to strengthen healthy branches. By removing unproductive parts of a fruit tree, more energy can be directed to the good branches, resulting in better fruit. The second reason for pruning is to allow for more air and sunlight to reach parts of the tree that would otherwise be inaccessible. This is especially important for the center of the tree, which can become wet and vulnerable to disease if no pruning is done.

We might think pruning involves only the removal of dead wood, but Jesus says his Father prunes the fruitful branches. It seems we are always eager to have God remove painful things from our lives. We pray that cancer will be taken away, and that God will eliminate re-

lationship struggles, unemployment, or failing grades from our lives. But how willing are we to surrender good things to God's pruning so that even more good will result?

Do we submit our talents, skills, and other gifts to the Lord so that he can refine them to great benefit in his kingdom—for his own sake, not ours? Pruning can hurt! But it will also allow more of the light of God's glory and the wind of the Holy Spirit to regenerate our lives.

Lord, help me to hold nothing back when it comes to obeying your will. Give me the grace to submit to your pruning, so that more of your glory will fill my life. Amen.

## NOT FOR OUR PICKING OR CHOOSING

*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace . . . .*

—Galatians 5:22

Bible scholars often note that Paul's description of "the fruit of the Spirit" in this passage can be misunderstood. Paul mentions nine virtues here, yet the word for "fruit" is singular. In other words, there is one fruit of the Spirit, not "fruits," and it shows itself in many ways (even more ways than the nine listed here—see, for example, Colossians 3:12-17).

This confirms the interconnectedness of all virtues that develop in our lives through the Spirit's work in us. None of them stands alone. In fact, each one requires the others in order to exist at all. When the Holy Spirit produces fruit within us, the full range of his ministry is brought to bear through us.

So we should never focus on just some of the virtues at the expense of any others. Because of our unique personalities, we

might find it easier to practice some virtues than others. But that doesn't mean we can choose a few as our favorites. Nor can we avoid a difficult virtue, such as patience, and try to excuse ourselves by saying, "I'm not a very patient person by nature." If we are impatient by nature, that is precisely what the fruit of the Spirit is designed to conquer!

Spiritual regeneration is a "package deal." Because "we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit." Praise God that his one fruit has so many deliciously good qualities!

Lord, I desire the fullness of the Holy Spirit's ministry in my heart! Help me to grow to be more like Jesus in every way, so that the world will know I belong to you. Amen.

## WE WORK OUT WHAT GOD WORKS IN

*Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you . . . .* —Philippians 2:12-13

Tomorrow we'll begin a survey on the fruit of the Spirit described in Galatians 5:22-23. We'll spend two days on each of the virtues listed there, using the first day to consider how the virtue is a product of the Holy Spirit's work in us, and using the second day to look at how spiritual growth involves work on our part too.

It's important to keep both of these activities in mind. If we focus too much on God's activity, we can become complacent and think spiritual growth is his responsibility. But if we focus too much on our own work, we can begin to think (proudly) that we're doing it all ourselves, or we can think (despairingly) that no fruit we produce will ever meet God's approval.

The fruit of the Spirit is both a gift and a task. Abiding in Christ is initiated by God's grace, but

we grow in that relationship as we work out what God has worked in us. I am reminded of a prayer of St. Augustine, who saw that the only reason we can grow in obedience is because God supplies the strength we need to obey him.

Like Augustine, we must acknowledge how desperately we need God's grace and how willingly God gives it. As God works faithfully in us, we need to be committed to working wholeheartedly with him in all the areas of our lives.

Dear Lord, thank you for providing everything I need to be a fruitful Christian. Help me, in total reliance on your grace, to devote all my energy to growing closer to you. Amen.

## LOVE

*This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. —1 John 4:10*

When you think about it, it makes sense that love is the first of the virtues listed in Galatians 5:22-23 as “the fruit of the Spirit.” The spiritual qualities that follow are further elaborations on the primary fruit of love. It’s no wonder that 1 Corinthians 13, which details the attributes of love, has much in common with the description of the fruit of the Spirit. When we read there that love is patient, kind, and rejoices with the truth (see 1 Corinthians 13:4, 6) we see how the virtues of patience, kindness, and joy are expressions of love in action.

*Love* is a word used in many different contexts and is easily misunderstood. Our basic problem as sinful people has to do with love. You might say we all have a terrible love life: we love the wrong things for the wrong reasons and in the wrong ways.

Even our love for good things can often go wrong.

The only cure for our lovesick hearts is the pure love of God. That’s the love God has shown us in Jesus, his Son. God’s love for a fallen world is a love so powerful that it enables us to love God, others, and even ourselves rightly. It’s God’s love that is the foundation for our love, just as a branch’s capacity to bear fruit depends entirely on the vine. Only God’s love for people will make us loving people.

Thank you, Father, for sending Jesus into the world. May your great love continue to change our hearts so that we will love others as you have loved us. Amen.

## THE LEGACY OF DIRK WILLEMS

*Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.*

—Romans 12:9

Some years ago, while vacationing in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, my family visited the Mennonite Information Center and saw a display that told the story of Dirk Willems. He was a Dutch Christian who lived in the 1500s. Dirk was baptized as an infant but decided to be re-baptized as an adult. Town officials in his hometown of Asperen considered that to be heresy, so they put Dirk in prison.

In jail, Dirk tied rags together to form a rope that he used to scale down the tower wall. He had lost a lot of weight while in prison, so he could walk across the frozen moat that surrounded the jail without falling through the ice. A guard saw Dirk escaping and chased him, but the ice broke beneath him.

Dirk heard the guard's cries for help and turned back to save his captor's life. After Dirk rescued

him, the guard arrested him again. This time, Dirk was sent to a more secure prison cell and placed in wooden stocks. Soon afterward, he was burned at the stake.

It's a tragic story, but it illustrates the enduring power of love by which good conquers evil. Centuries later, the name Dirk Willems is recalled by many who saw in him an example of Christ-like love for one's enemies.

Are there any other stories of love for enemies that you can share?

Dear Lord, you have lavished us with love even when we were most unlovable. Use us, we pray, to show your love to everyone—even our enemies. Amen.

## JOY

*You welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.* —1 Thessalonians 1:6

In his book *Loving God Up Close*, Calvin Miller admits that there have been times when he has gone to church with a critical spirit. On those Sunday mornings, nothing seems right. There are spelling mistakes in the bulletin. Singers in the choir hit wrong notes. The minister makes too many grammatical errors and should have spent more time in study before preaching his sermon.

Are you honest enough to admit that sometimes you have gone to church in that kind of mood—“snarling and growling” in the presence of God, as Miller describes it? If so, you know how important it is to have the Holy Spirit produce joy in your heart. Paul noticed that the believers in Thessalonica had the joy given by the Holy Spirit. This kind of joy touches our hearts in places that disappointment

cannot reach. If this deep joy was more powerful than the severe suffering the Thessalonians experienced, it's certainly strong enough to conquer our minor complaints and crankiness.

That's what Miller says happens whenever he goes to church in the wrong frame of mind. The worship service gets better as it moves along—not because it's being improved but because he is. That's how God has designed worship to work. As we give God glory, God gives us joy.

Thank you, Lord, for giving us joy. Help us to submit more and more to you so that the Holy Spirit will increase our joy in you. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

## THE SECRET TO JOYFULNESS

*Rejoice always.*

—1 Thessalonians 5:16

Our verse for today is one of the shortest in the Bible. But what a big message these two words convey!

This verse is a command, which means joy is not optional for Christians. Joyless Christians are disobedient Christians. Not only that, this verse tells us to rejoice always. But how can we possibly do that?

The main thing to consider is the source of our joy. Sometimes we're tempted to think that the level of our joy is directly related to the situation we are in. The more pleasant our environment, the greater our joy will be. The problem with that way of thinking is that we can't always choose or control our circumstances. Our health may decline; we may lose our job; a loved one may pass away. What's more, there's no guarantee that a happy environment

will always produce a happy heart. The playwright George Bernard Shaw once said there are two sources of unhappiness in life: the first is not getting what you want, and the second is getting it.

The only reliable source of joy is Jesus Christ. The external realities of our lives will change, but the internal reality of having Jesus dwell in our hearts never changes.

If we stay connected to Jesus, the command to be joyful takes care of itself.

Lord Jesus, help us to see our relationship with you as the most important part of our lives, and to find joy in you despite difficult circumstances. Thank you for your faithful love. In your name, Amen.

## PEACE

*The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. —Philippians 4:7*

Philippians is sometimes called one of Paul's "prison letters." That's because Paul wrote this letter while imprisoned, probably in Rome (see Philippians 1:12-14). While the details of Paul's imprisonment are sketchy, it probably was similar to what we would call "house arrest" today. Acts 28:16-31 describes the situation. Despite being bound with chains, Paul was able to share the gospel during his two-year imprisonment in Rome.

Even though Paul enjoyed some freedom while living under house arrest, he was carefully guarded by a Roman soldier. Paul was probably chained to whoever was responsible for guarding him. That's helpful to know, because when Paul writes about the peace of God that "guards" our hearts, he uses a word that was common in military jargon. Paul may

have been chained to a soldier, but he was also connected to a much higher authority. Paul belonged to God and was protected by the peace of God.

God gives his people that same peace to today. That's why so many believers feel protected and at ease in situations that would otherwise make them feel worried and discouraged.

Are you feeling anxious and afraid today? The peace of Jesus is available to help (see John 14:27). He cares for you and wants you to have peace.

Lord Jesus, grant us your peace. Thank you for providing it. We surely need it. Keep us close to you so that we will always feel protected by the power of your love. Amen.

## CHANNELS OF PEACE

*Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.* —Colossians 3:15

Are you familiar with the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi? It begins with the words “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.” Then it describes some ways we can spread God’s peace around us: “Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy.”

This beautiful prayer reminds us of the role we have as Christians. Like all of God’s blessings, the gift of peace is not intended to be something we keep to ourselves. God, who has made peace with a rebellious creation through the death of Jesus (see Colossians 1:19-20), calls us to be peacemakers in his world.

This is a striking testimony to God’s willingness to stoop down to our level. Cosmic peace has

been secured by God in Christ, yet God tells us to “let the peace of Christ rule.” How incredibly humble of God to place the advancement of his peace in our hands.

Of course, God doesn’t require our help to do his work in the world. But he wants us to participate in the glory of Christ’s rule over creation. He wants us to live up to the high calling of peacemaking.

Is there someone God is waiting for you to make peace with?

Lord, the only peace we can share with others is the peace you have first given us. Increase our desire to see your peace flow out of us to bless a hurting world. Amen.

## PATIENCE, FORBEARANCE

*I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience . . . .*

—1 Timothy 1:16

When we hear the word *patience*, we probably think of the virtue that enables us to wait. That's one way of looking at it, but Spirit-led patience is also much more. Patience is longsuffering. It involves more than passive waiting; it is active forbearance. It is a deliberate willingness to put up with disagreeable things in pursuit of higher goals.

The best example of patience in the Bible is God himself. A number of times, God is described as being "slow to anger" (see Exodus 34:6; Psalm 103:8). This phrase captures what true patience is. Patient people do more than just wait. They actively restrain their rightful anger and frustration. For a higher purpose, they put up with things that they know are wrong.

This is the attitude our longsuffering God has toward sinful

people. For Paul, the "immense patience" of Jesus meant that God put up with all his wickedness for a long time before showing mercy to him. Paul calls himself "the worst of sinners," reflecting back on the time of his life when he persecuted Christians (see Acts 7:54-8:3). But God had other plans for Paul (Acts 9:1-31; 13:1-28:31). That could easily be the testimony of every believer.

How wonderful that God's love rests on his own capacity for goodness, and not our own!

Dear Lord, thank you for being patient with us. Forgive us for all we do wrong, and help us to be living testimonies of your mercy. In Jesus' name, Amen.

**“THANK YOU FOR WAITING”**

*Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming.*

—James 5:7

When our daughter turned sixteen, like many young people that age, she couldn't wait to get her driver's license. So we took her to get her learner's permit. When we first arrived at the government agency, someone behind a desk gave us a slip of paper with a number on it. She told us to have a seat and wait for our number to be called.

The room was full of people, so we knew we would have to wait a while. We were there for nearly three hours! At one point, I noticed that the words “Thank you for waiting” appeared at the bottom of the slip of paper. I found it odd that someone I didn't know was thanking me for patience I didn't have!

Like many virtues, patience is best cultivated in situations where it is most required. Just as physical therapists teach people to do exercises that strengthen

certain muscles, God gives us experiences that can enhance specific spiritual qualities. If you want (and need) to become more patient, don't be surprised if God puts you in situations where patience is needed. That's exactly how patience is practiced.

Times of prolonged waiting may not be fun. But the next time you have to wait, don't focus on the inconvenience. Thank the Lord for giving you a vigorous spiritual workout session!

Lord, how hard it is to be patient! Help me to take advantage of the opportunities you provide to become a stronger Christian. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## KINDNESS

*When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us . . . .*  
—Titus 3:4-5

The Greek word that is translated as “kindness” in Galatians 5:22 sounds similar to the Greek word for “Christ.” In the days of the early church, that sometimes led to confusion among unbelievers. They weren’t always sure if Christians actually believed in a person called Christ, or if they practiced a religion that focused on kindness.

When you think about it, that confusion was actually quite a compliment to the first Christians! How wonderful it would be if kindness stood out in the impression that we Christians gave to unbelievers today. Unfortunately, kindness may not always be the first thing that comes to mind when people think of Christians and the church.

This is why we must be diligent in our prayers that the Holy Spirit produce the fruit of kind-

ness in us. As Paul writes in today’s Scripture reading, the kindness of God was the only thing strong enough to conquer our foolishness, disobedience, and bondage to sin.

We must pray that the power of God’s kindness that saved us will also be the power that continually transforms our character.

This is what the ministry of the Holy Spirit is all about. He wants to make kindness flourish in our lives so that when others notice it they will naturally think of Christ.

Thank you, heavenly Father, for treating us kindly in Christ. Fill us with your Holy Spirit so that others will see Jesus living in us. We pray in his name. Amen.

## CLOTHED WITH KINDNESS

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

Gary Chapman is a Christian marriage counselor whose ministry has been a blessing to many people. At one point in his book *Hope for the Separated*, he touches on the subject of kindness. He tells the story of a woman who wanted to divorce her husband and to hurt him as much as possible in the process.

The marriage counselor she consulted was not a Christian. He told her that the best way to inflict pain on her husband would be to compliment him profusely. By showering him with affection, she would assure him of her devotion and set him up for a crushing fall when divorce proceedings began.

The woman took the counselor's advice. When she returned to see the counselor two months later, he presumed it was because she was set to divorce her husband. To his

surprise, the woman reported that she had fallen in love with her husband all over again! Divorcing him was now the furthest thing from her mind. It seems the affection she showed her husband made him feel so loved that he started to respond to her in kind. Even though her kindness started out as cruelty in disguise, it grew to become genuine.

That's the power of kindness in repairing broken relationships. Acts of kindness not only bless other people. Like beautiful articles of clothing, they adorn our lives as well.

Lord, help us each day to dress in clothes of kindness so that others will experience your love through us. Amen.

## GOODNESS

*[We have] everything we need . . . through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. —2 Peter 1:3*

At first glance, we might think Paul didn't need to include goodness in his description of the fruit of the Spirit. Goodness can seem to be a catch-all that absorbs every other virtue into itself. Kindness is good, patience is good, love is good. What is it about goodness that distinguishes it from any other virtues?

Notice how often we hear the word "good." People talk about having a good day, reading a good book, or eating a good meal. Sometimes, the word *good* is even used to describe things that are *not* good for you. A man talks about smoking a good cigar, and hockey players who pummel each other with their fists talk about having a good fight.

What one person considers good, someone else may think is hardly good at all. That's because our concept of goodness

is corrupted by sin. We are not always able to recognize true goodness when we see it. It also means we are victimized by the craftiness of the evil one more often than we realize, since he revels in giving something sinful the appearance of something good (see 2 Corinthians 11:14).

Only the glory of God can help us. God's glory illuminates foolish minds and enlightens hearts darkened by sin. If true goodness is what you desire, "taste and see that the LORD is good" (Psalm 34:8).

Lord, the power of your goodness helps us know the difference between right and wrong. Continue to give us that power, and fill us with your glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.

**FOR GOODNESS' SAKE**

*Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness . . .).*  
—Ephesians 5:8-9

An old poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson says, “Sow a thought and you reap an action; sow an act and you reap a habit; sow a habit and you reap a character; sow a character and you reap a destiny.” There’s a lot of wisdom in those words. They teach us that choices have consequences.

That’s certainly true when it comes to practicing goodness. People who want to grow in goodness try to obey the command in today’s Scripture to “find out what pleases the Lord.” And, as we can see, that command has both a positive and a negative application. Living as children of light means both doing what is good and not doing what is evil.

Good and evil actions are radically different from each other, as much as light is different from darkness. But there is one thing they have in common: the more

we practice them, the more skilled we become at doing them. That’s because the things we do shape the kind of people we are. Choices develop character.

When you tell a lie, for example, you not only say something untrue; you become a liar. This explains why honest people don’t cheat. They know that only cheaters do that, and that is not the kind of person they want to become.

Place a high premium on the fruit of goodness! You’ll discover that the bigger it gets, the sweeter it tastes.

Lord, forgive us for all we do wrong. Help us to live in the light of your goodness and grace so that everyone will know we belong to you. Amen.

## FAITHFULNESS

*The Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one.*  
—2 Thessalonians 3:3

In our reflections on the fruit of the Spirit, we have seen how these virtues are rooted in the character of God. This is incredibly good news, because it assures us that producing this fruit is ultimately God's work. Through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, sinful people are increasingly transformed to become like Christ (see 2 Corinthians 3:18).

When we consider faithfulness, we can see that this is especially anchored in God's character. The Old Testament of the Bible resounds with examples of God's faithfulness. God is faithful and keeps his promises, despite his people's unfaithfulness to him. And in the New Testament the Greek word for "faithfulness" points to being full of faith. That says something about a person's dedication as well as their reliability. A faith-

ful person not only has strong faith; that person is someone in whom others have faith. A faithful believer not only trusts wholeheartedly in God; that person is someone others know they can trust.

We see the connection most clearly between our faith and the Lord's faithfulness. The Lord has pledged always to love us, despite our unfaithfulness to him. And the Lord is faithful. God's covenant faithfulness is the sure foundation on which all our faith securely rests.

"Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father"! How comforting it is to know that my faith rests on the solid ground of your promises. Help me to grow in my faithfulness to you. Amen.

## AN AUDIENCE OF ONE

*You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ . . .*  
—Colossians 1:7

D. A. Carson wrote a book called *Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor*. Much of it consists of journal entries that Carson's father, who was also a pastor, wrote over the course of his ministry. The name D. A. Carson is well known in evangelical Christianity, but until he published his father's memoirs, the name Tom Carson was much less well known.

The book is a testimony to the beauty of ordinary ministry. Tom Carson never served a big congregation that swelled with new converts. He never wrote a book or held denominational leadership positions. Much of his ministry seemed to be characterized by discouragement. Many of his journal entries were accompanied with tears.

Much of ordinary ministry could also be called faithful ministry, and it's not restricted to the work

of pastors. The word for "minister" in Colossians 1:7 is most often translated as "servant" in the New Testament. Servants do ordinary ministry, like visiting the sick, befriending the lonely, and welcoming the stranger. This is not glamorous work, and it may not seem to produce much spiritual fruit, in our opinion.

But let's beware of exchanging what God calls faithfulness for what the world calls success. The acclaim of multitudes is nothing compared to the approval of God.

Paul called Epaphras a faithful servant of Christ. Could any better compliment be given?

Forgive us, Lord, if we are more concerned with popularity than faithfulness. Help us to serve only you. Amen.

## GENTLENESS

*"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest . . . ." —Matthew 11:29*

The yoke Jesus refers to in this Scripture reading has a lot to teach us about how the Holy Spirit produces the fruit of gentleness within us.

A yoke was a heavy wooden bar that a farmer would place across the necks of two oxen so that they were forced to work together. The purpose was not just to get twice as much work done; more than anything, the yoke was a training device.

When an ox reached the point when it could begin plowing, a farmer would team it up with an older, more experienced animal. In this way the younger, more stubborn ox would be forced to walk in step with the stronger animal who led the way.

This is not a very flattering description of a disciple. But it is a wonderful picture of our Lord.

The sinless Son of God wants to be yoked with rebellious people so that they can learn from him.

Jesus doesn't force his yoke on us; he humbly offers it.

Have you taken it? If you have, you know how easy a burden it really is.

We don't need to worry about producing the fruit of gentleness ourselves. All we need to do is keep in step with the Savior. And his gentleness will soon become ours.

Lord Jesus, there is so much I need to learn from you. Help me to walk beside you, to listen to your teaching, and to enjoy the rest that only you can give. Amen.

## CHOOSING GENTLENESS

*Be completely humble and gentle . . . .*

—Ephesians 4:2

In the Bible the word for “gentle” is sometimes translated as “meek.” Being meek is probably not something most people aspire to. In our way of thinking, *meekness* not only sounds like *weakness*; the two words mean virtually the same thing. But true gentleness resembles strength more than weakness.

Gentle people have the potential to be rude or proud, but they have deliberately decided not to behave that way. They have intentionally chosen gentleness. That actually takes more strength than it does to treat others harshly. Unleashing our anger is usually easier than restraining ourselves. So meekness is hardly weakness. A decision not to retaliate may look like inaction, but it’s actually humility at work. What appears to be a lack of assertiveness is robust spiritual action.

In his book *Grace for the Moment*, Max Lucado offers a pledge that we could all make our own: “Nothing is won by force. I choose to be gentle. If I raise my voice, may it be only in praise. If I clench my fist, may it be only in prayer. If I make a demand, may it be only of myself.”

Those words convey how demanding it can be to choose gentleness. But we can do that because we have experienced the Lord’s tender love. We can trust that he will abundantly provide the strength we need to be gentle. His meekness is greater than our weakness.

Thank you, Jesus, for being a gentle shepherd who tenderly cares for his sheep. Help us to be gentle with others, just as you have been gentle with us. Amen.

## SELF-CONTROL

*You . . . are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you.—Romans 8:9*

These days we are bombarded with advertisements about improving the self. The multibillion dollar self-improvement industry consists of a seemingly endless supply of cosmetics, fitness equipment, strategies to boost self-esteem, and weight-loss programs.

There's nothing wrong with wanting to become more healthy or improving the way you look. But as we have been noticing this month, human nature is in need of much more than mere improvement. Nothing short of total re-creation is needed, and no person has the resources to accomplish that. As sinful people, we do not simply have a deficient self that needs to be improved. We have a rebellious self that needs to be controlled. For this, only a mighty power from a source beyond ourselves will do.

No branch can improve itself. The quality of its fruit depends entirely on the vine to which it is attached.

When the Holy Spirit produces self-control in us, he exerts the power of God that liberates us from the tyranny of our sinful nature. This work of regeneration goes much deeper than behavior modification or an external quick fix. A rebellious self is transformed into an obedient self. As Paul states in Colossians 3:10, we are given a "new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator." Who would settle for self-improvement when the self-control of the Spirit gives so much more?

Help me, Lord, to surrender totally to you. Fill me with the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

## THE SUPPLEMENT OF SELF-CONTROL

*Make every effort to add to your faith . . . self-control . . .*

—2 Peter 1:5-6

Today's Scripture reading lists a number of things that we are told to add to our faith. In a way like vitamins for our health, these virtues help give us a stronger, more well-rounded faith.

One of the virtues Peter identifies is self-control. When we see how Peter behaved in the time of Jesus' teaching ministry (in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), we might think he should not be someone to preach about self-control. Sometimes Peter was hotheaded and impulsive!

For example, when Peter was with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, a little more self-control on Peter's part would have gone a long way to prevent Malchus, the high priest's servant, from losing one of his ears (John 18:10).

Peter, however, became a follower of Jesus whose faith matured over time. Even more important, he was someone the Lord used to write his Word. So the instructions in 2 Peter are not so much Peter's as God's. God gets his message about self-control across through the example of someone who sorely needed it, and who was finally blessed to have it. (See Acts 10-12.)

Spiritual growth is a life-long journey. Peter may have learned the value of self-control the hard way, but he did learn. Have you?

Help us, Lord, to work hard at making sure our faith is strong and vibrant. Thank you for giving us opportunities to see our spiritual progress over time. Amen.

## GROWTH IS GRACIOUS

*"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last."*

—John 15:16

Along with our reflections this month on the fruit of the Spirit, let's note some general observations about how we grow as Christians. For the next few days we'll consider how spiritual growth is gracious, gradual, and guaranteed.

One of the important things we've noticed this month is that spiritual growth is the result of God's work in us. Though we have an important role to play, even our determination to flourish with the fruit of the Spirit is evidence of God's grace. The Holy Spirit is the one who stimulates our desire to grow in Christ. Growth is gracious.

This means we should keep our attention on Jesus and not ourselves. If we focus too much on how well we perform as Christians, we are bound to get distracted. An old anony-

mous poem, "The Centipede's Dilemma," makes the point well:

A centipede was happy quite,  
until a frog in fun  
said, "Pray, which leg comes  
after which?"

This raised her mind to such  
a pitch,  
she lay distracted in the ditch,  
considering how to run.

Don't focus too much on how advancing in the spiritual life actually works, or on how well you're doing it. Trust that growth will happen, and when it does, thank Jesus for the fruit produced by his appointment.

Thank you, Lord, for choosing us to bear fruit. What an incredible gift you have given us! Help us never to forget that everything we do is only by your grace. Amen.

## GROWTH IS GRADUAL

*I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.*  
—Philippians 3:12

The Spanish musician Pablo Casals was one of the most accomplished cellists of all time. His commitment to practicing the cello illustrates the importance of perseverance. Though Casals had mastered the cello, he continued to practice for three hours every day, even when he was elderly. When he was 93 years old, someone asked him why he practiced so much. He responded, "I'm beginning to notice some improvement."

How much improvement do you see in your life when it comes to spiritual growth? God's plan for every believer is that they advance in their spiritual life. Like Paul, we ought to strain, in God's strength, for greater spiritual maturity. It's striking that Paul should feel that way, since he had already gone through many challenges and triumphs in his journey

with Christ. Think of his dramatic conversion (Acts 9), the persecutions he faced, or his vision of paradise (2 Corinthians 11:16-12:10). We might think Paul would have been satisfied (and worn out) by his career as a missionary, but he yearned for even more.

Paul longed for more because the Spirit at work in him was gradually making him like Christ and filling him with the desire to serve God with his whole being, as Jesus did. In Christlike humility Paul knew he had further to grow, and that in Christ's strength he could "press on."

Lord, no matter how far we have traveled with you, we still have far to go. Help us to grow in faith each day. In Jesus, Amen.

## GROWTH IS GUARANTEED

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

We hear a lot about guarantees in our world today. Sometimes people are promised a guaranteed return on money they invest. Gadgets for the kitchen are guaranteed to reduce the time needed for meal preparation, and golf training equipment is guaranteed to fix the dreaded slice. But there are really very few guarantees in life. As Benjamin Franklin put it, “In this world nothing can be said to be certain except death and taxes.”

Thankfully, there is more we can add to that short list. Jesus promised, “If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit” (John 15:5). That’s why when Paul prays for the Philippians, he asks God to fill them “with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ.” Paul knows that “he who began a good work in [them] will carry it on to completion.”

How reassuring these promises are, especially in times of discouragement. It may take a long time before fruit appears, and sometimes it may take painful experiences to produce it, but fruit will grow.

Here’s a rich blessing to conclude our devotions for this month: “May . . . the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it” (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).

Lord, help me to live every day in fellowship with you. Thank you for promising to continue and to complete your work in me. In Jesus, Amen.

# this month

## Learning from the Church Worldwide

**Bob Heerspink**

For the past six years I've been privileged to lead the organization that brings you these monthly devotions. Back to God Ministries International (of which ReFrame Media is the English-language ministry) is a worldwide media ministry that shares the good news of Jesus in ten major languages through radio, television, print, and Internet.

During this time I've learned so much from the church worldwide that I want to share some of those discoveries in the following devotions for February. The church is the body of Christ. All parts contribute to the whole. Every part has something to give to the body. That's true in our own churches and in the church of Christ worldwide as a whole.

Today people of many different ethnicities and cultures are becoming part of our own communities. So even as we continue in worldwide missions, we realize we can learn from and work with worldwide neighbors right here at home. May God continue to strengthen our faith as we learn from others.

*Bob Heerspink is a pastor in the Christian Reformed Church and the director of Back to God Ministries International. He is cohost of Groundwork, a weekly audio program, available on radio and at Groundworkonline.com, that explores the teachings of Scripture. He and his wife, Edie, have three grown children. Bob enjoys reading, water sports, and the occasional afternoon puttering in his wife's flower garden.*

## WHERE ARE THE CHRISTIANS?

*In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established . . . and all nations will stream to it.* —Isaiah 2:2

"All nations" is one of my favorite phrases in the Bible. God is an inclusive God. When he established a beachhead in our fallen world by starting a little nation called Israel, he was already thinking big. God's plan was to reach out through Israel to call all nations to himself.

Today, as never before, God's intent is being fulfilled. Today in Kenya there are more Anglican worshipers on a typical Sunday than in Canada, Great Britain, and the United States combined. The number of practicing Christians in China has overtaken the number of worshipers in all of Europe. God's promise of a gospel that reaches "to the ends of the earth" is being realized (Acts 1:8). All nations are streaming toward the mountain of the Lord's temple—not by pilgrimage to a physical temple in Jerusalem, but by coming to

Jesus, the one who fulfills the temple's deepest meaning of God's presence among us.

Unfortunately many of us haven't kept up on what God is doing to fulfill his global plans. We still think of the church as strong in Europe and North America but in its infancy in the rest of the world. The truth is far different.

Praise God for the amazing things he is doing in our world. And thank him that in a shrinking world we can experience community with fellow believers from across all cultures and nations.

Lord, you are doing great things in the world. Open our eyes to see. Catch us up into your marvelous work of calling the nations to Christ. Amen.

## WHO ARE THE MISSIONARIES?

*If I say, "I will not . . . speak anymore in his name," his word is in my heart like a fire . . . ."*  
—Jeremiah 20:9

Today Brazil sends more missionaries to serve on international fields than Great Britain or Canada. The small nation of South Korea is already sending half as many missionaries into the world as is the United States, and the number is growing. These missionaries are serving all over the globe—including more than 35,000 in North America!

Obviously, this is sobering stuff for anyone who thinks that the only flow of the gospel is "from the West to the rest." North Americans are used to thinking that they are on the sending side of mission relationships. But today Christians from around the world are being caught up into the delight of fulfilling Jesus' great commission (Matthew 28:19-20).

Jeremiah explains why that is so. The gospel has within it energy birthed by the Spirit that com-

pels us to tell others. Jeremiah declares that he cannot stop speaking the word of the Lord. Suppressing the gospel witness by failing to speak will only create in his heart a fire that will consume him.

He is right, of course. Sometimes we are so intimidated by an opportunity to share the gospel that we think the easy way out is to say nothing. But there is emotional cost to *not* speaking the gospel. If we do not seek to set the world ablaze with the fire of God's truth and love, we will feel the heat of our own guilt and failure to obey our Lord's commission.

Lord, let the missionary zeal of Christians everywhere inspire our own witness. Help us to share your good news. Amen.

## HEARING GOD IN SURPRISING PLACES

*"If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria!"*

—2 Kings 5:3

Naaman was a great general with a terrible problem: leprosy. Though he moved in powerful circles, no one could offer any hope for his condition—except a young slave girl from Israel who understood God's power and was willing to share where true hope was found. This slave girl shared the good news of God with a leader who was tempted to think he could handle life on his own. Naaman needed to learn from others.

During the past six years, as I have served in media ministry, I've learned that spiritual insights can come from surprising places. I've often traveled to review our international media work, only to discover that I have so much to learn. I've learned about sacrifice from Japanese Christians who have known the pain of broken relationships with family after accepting

Christ. I've learned about courage from Arabic Christians who face daily threats because of their faith. I've learned wisdom from Indonesian believers who integrate their Christian faith into cultures that are hostile to the gospel. I've learned from God's servants everywhere.

What will it take for us to learn from unexpected sources? It will take a spirit of humility. Naaman's humility almost ran dry when Elisha told him to bathe in the Jordan!

Sacrifice your pride. Today God may wish to teach you a lesson of faith. Be open to being taught from a source you don't expect.

Lord, we often think we know it all. But you intend new faith lessons for us. Open our eyes. Amen.

## GOSPEL POWER

*"My word that goes out from my mouth . . . will not return to me empty."*  
—Isaiah 55:11

I was in Egypt for a conference with our Arabic staff. While traveling along the Nile River, I couldn't help noticing a graphic display of the life-giving power of water. On one side of the road, beside the Nile, fields were lush and green. On the other side was an endless vista of desert.

In Isaiah's day people understood the precarious nature of living in an arid land. Each year the autumn rains brought renewed life to the dry fields of Palestine. The rains brought life where there was death.

The same is true of the Word of God. As part of a media ministry that operates nearly 40 ministry websites, airs radio programs on over 2,000 stations, and distributes nearly 4 million devotional booklets a year, I am deeply thankful for the power of the Word of God. I am convinced

that our work makes an eternal difference. Why? Because, as Isaiah indicates, God's Word is at work in the world, and it never fails to deliver on God's intentions. Or, as Hebrews 4:12 puts it, the Word of God "is alive and active."

That's true in our personal lives too. Sometimes we want so badly to be different people. But we don't know how to begin. Here's a suggestion. Water the dry places of your life with God's Word. You'll be amazed by the results.

Lord, what we can't accomplish on our own, you achieve through your Word. Help us to immerse our own lives in your Word and to bring that Word to others. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## HELD BY GOD

*Those who trust in themselves are fools, but those who walk in wisdom are kept safe.*  
—Proverbs 28:26

As we rushed to catch a flight out of Brazil, rains pouring down the hillside changed the roadway into a river. Passing trucks threw sheets of water on our windshield and created zero visibility. Still, our driver refused to slow down. "Don't worry," he told us, "my car has good tires."

In situations like that, I'd be more comfortable if I were at the steering wheel. But when I travel internationally, I find myself in the hands of others. Fellow believers drive me around, translate for me, and help me plan a meaningful schedule of daily events. I've learned I need to rely on the people God has given me.

I've also learned that everything doesn't need to go according to my schedule. As a colleague said to me as we traveled together in third world countries: "Live by the motto, 'It is what it is.'"

Living by that motto doesn't mean I don't plan. But it does mean I raise my trust level of others. Ultimately it means I raise my trust level of God and look for his leading in the unexpected twists of the journey.

Proverbs reminds me that when I put my trust in myself, I have a fool at the steering wheel. Ultimate wisdom is from God, and he uses the "many advisers" he has provided for the work he has given me to do (see Proverbs 15:22).

Whom has God given you today to help steer your way?

Lord, you are in charge of our lives. Thank you for the people you provide to help us chart wise and thoughtful paths. Amen.

## THE GIFT OF HOSPITALITY

*Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.*

—1 Peter 4:9

Wherever I travel in my work for international ministries, I am continually amazed by the way people open up their hearts and homes to me. They practice hospitality.

In many parts of North America, hospitality has become rather anemic. It often amounts to little more than a coffee gathering among friends. It's more common to see "hospitality" advertised by restaurants, hotels, and resorts that try to snag my dollar when I'm on vacation.

But the robust hospitality of the Scriptures is not a welcome based on how much cash (or plastic) you have in your wallet to pay for a room and a meal. It's not even confined to people who are "like ourselves." The hospitality Scripture speaks of is typically focused on people different from ourselves.

Many of us have a certain fear of strangers. We're intimidated by people who dress, eat, and talk differently than we do. But biblical hospitality looks beyond differences to see similarities—to recognize others as fellow imagebearers of God. This hospitality is an act of welcoming grace—and therefore participates in the very dynamic of the character of Jesus Christ.

One day Sarah and Abraham welcomed visitors who were actually the Lord and his angels (see Hebrews 13:2). Whom in your community do you need to welcome in the name of our Lord?

Father, grant us the grace to overcome our fears and welcome people who need hospitality, that we may share the love we have received from you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## PRACTICING PENTECOST

*Utterly amazed, they asked: “. . . How is it that each of us hears them in our native language?”*  
—Acts 2:7-8

When we work cross-culturally, language differences can become a barrier to communication. We miss a word's nuance, or we struggle with an expression that is difficult to translate. I once spent much of a day reassuring an international colleague that we would “figure out” a particular ministry challenge—only to discover at the end of the day that he didn't have a clue what that expression meant.

Yet in spite of linguistic differences, I find that as I meet Christians from other cultures, we have an understanding of each other that transcends our challenges with language. Why? Because we understand the one Word that transcends all words—the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ. In our common relationship with Jesus Christ, we are drawn into a relationship

of love and understanding that breaks down walls of misunderstanding that language barriers so often create.

The division at Babel was undone at Pentecost. Now, all peoples hear the same gospel, and they are better able to understand each other.

Whom in your community is God nudging you to reach with the gospel? Perhaps language difference makes you hesitate. Practice your own Pentecost as you reach out with the good news.

Lord, we crave community, yet we find it so hard to establish. Help us to receive it as part of your wonderful Pentecost gift, by which we are woven together into a fellowship of grace in Christ. Amen.

## THE POWER OF PATIENCE

*Better a patient person than a warrior.*

—Proverbs 16:32

I am not by nature a patient person. But in my ministry travels I think I have learned a few things about patience. Perhaps it was in missing a connecting flight by two minutes and having to stay another day at the airport. Or perhaps it was on a dawn-to-dusk road trip that back home would have taken only a couple of hours. Lots of experiences have reminded me that my time table isn't governed by me or anyone else except God.

But is patience really important? It can seem like such a wimpy virtue. The strong-willed, impatient traveler who makes a scene about a late flight is the one who gets service at the check-in desk.

Why does patience matter? Maybe because our God himself is patient (see Romans 9:22; 1 Peter 3:20). It's not that God loiters or wastes his time. Whether

it's "the fullness of time" in sending his Son (Galatians 4:4), or the moment when Christ returns again, God's timing is impeccable. Can we trust that the one who sets the cosmic calendar can also bring his sense of timing into our own lives?

From Proverbs we can see that the strength of the patient person exceeds that of the warrior. Waiting for God is tougher than taking matters into our own hands. Our exercise of Christian ministry invariably demands the wisdom to know when to "wait on the Lord."

Lord, when we run ahead of your plans, we fail. Give us the gift of patience to align our lives with your perfect intentions for us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## LET THE WALLS FALL DOWN

*He himself is our peace, who has . . . destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.*  
—Ephesians 2:14

Though the caste system has been legally abolished in India, class struggles continue. Ads for potential spouses use veiled references to indicate preferred status. And for 165 million “untouchables” (Dalits), life at the bottom of the social ladder remains full of discrimination, persecution, even violence.

But many “untouchables” have found the gospel to be a magnetic attraction. Why? Because in Christ all barriers, all walls of hostility, are torn down.

In Ephesians 2, as Paul speaks about Jews and Gentiles, he brings to mind the structure of the Jewish temple. Gentiles were separated from Jews by a wall that stood between the Court of the Gentiles and the Court of Jewish Women. But Christ has torn down the dividing wall with the sledgehammer of the cross. Now there is no Jew or

Gentile, no male or female, no slave or free—and no Dalit or Brahmin. All are one in Christ Jesus. (See Galatians 3:28.)

Of course, we don’t need to visit India to see class distinctions. Though not as formalized, they exist in North America too—and they put up strong resistance to creating true Christian community. In many churches, socioeconomic success defines those who feel they really belong.

Who is standing outside your class circle today? God wants you to tear down another dividing wall and share Jesus’ love.

Lord, help me share the good news in such a way that walls of difference come crashing down by the power of your grace. Amen.

## THE GIFTS OF THE NATIONS

*The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it.*  
—Revelation 21:24

One of the great delights of visiting ministries around the world is the opportunity to worship with other Christians. I've gathered with Sudanese Christians in an immigrant church in Cairo, African brothers and sisters in Congo, Japanese worshipers in Tokyo, and Indonesian seekers from rural areas of Java. While Christ is at the core of every worship experience, each group of worshippers reflects their own culture. Songs, music, and liturgy differ. And the wonderful thing is that our Lord likes it that way!

The new Jerusalem of Revelation 21 is a picture of the new creation Christ will establish at his return. The twelve gates of the city open in every direction, symbolic of the way God's kingdom is open to peoples and nations from every corner of the globe. And through those gates, we are

told, "The kings of the earth will bring their splendor." We also learn that "the glory and honor of the nations will be brought into [the new creation]."

God's new creation will be pure and holy. But that doesn't mean there will be no continuity with God's old creation. The purified cultural gifts of every people will find their place in God's new world. What an encouragement to begin today to claim our world for Christ's lordship! What are you doing today that will have lasting value for eternity?

Lord, you call us to unfold the incredible potential of our world. Help us to build well today as we look toward eternity, to your honor and glory. Amen.

## STOCKING FEET

*"Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."*  
—Exodus 3:5

I was preparing to enter the worship sanctuary to preach in a church in India. But before I went in, there was a request from the pastor of the church: Would I please take off my shoes? In fact, not just me but everyone else who was to lead in worship that day kicked off their loafers and sandals. No one mounted the pulpit there unless they were shoeless.

Of course, that request has a strong biblical precedent. When Moses stood in the presence of the Lord at the burning bush, God commanded him to remove his sandals. In the ancient Jewish world, to take off one's sandals was a mark of humility and respect.

While I wear shoes in the pulpits of North America, that little episode challenged me to ponder the way I approach worship. First, when I worship, do I really

think of myself as coming into the presence of God? We North American worshippers so quickly focus on what we are getting out of the worship experience. Shoeless worship reminded me that the real audience in worship is God himself.

Second, when I worship, do I really humble myself before God? I can't mount a pulpit in stocking feet without putting to death something of my pride. Is my regular approach to God in worship one of humility?

Lord, regardless of our footwear, may our approach to you in worship always be in humility and awe. May we delight in your glory, celebrate your majesty, and realize that we stand in your presence by grace alone. In Christ Jesus, Amen.

## DRINK AND LIVE

*"Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst."*

—John 4:14

I will never forget the early-morning boat ride I took down the Ganges River. Rising everywhere along the banks were steps leading up to Hindu temples. Bathers were already in the water, submerged to their necks, even though this stretch of the river is terribly polluted.

According to our guide, the bathers believed that, many ages ago, the Hindu gods spilled a few drops of the elixir of eternal life into the Ganges River. Bathing in the waters of the Ganges offered hope that you might come into contact with that powerful potion and experience salvation. For many who live along the Ganges, the trek to the river is a daily part of life.

The Samaritan woman daily made her way to the village well to draw water. And there Jesus offered himself as the living water that wells up to eternal

life. In Jesus' day, living water was the clear water of a flowing stream, compared to stagnant water found in a well or cistern. All who sustain a relationship of faith in Christ have the true source of pure, embracing, and never-ending nourishment.

My heart hurt for the thousands I saw in the Ganges that day. But you don't need to live in India to know spiritual thirst. You can be living the life of your dreams and still be dry as a cork at the center of your soul.

Come to Jesus and drink.

Lord Jesus, our lives are dry wastelands without the water of your life. Water us by your grace and Spirit, that we may experience the delight and fruitfulness of your kingdom. Amen.

## THE WAY OF PROSPERITY

*“Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”*  
—Matthew 25:40

The sun was setting as I arrived in Kinshasa, Congo, to help officiate at a graduation ceremony of Bible study students. As we drove to the hotel, we passed a large stadium. Paul, our French ministry leader, commented that the stadium had been full that day with people who gathered to hear a popular preacher of the “prosperity gospel”—the notion that health and wealth come to those with the faith to claim it.

I said I would have thought the prosperity gospel could only gain a foothold in societies where people are more likely to grow wealthy. “Ah,” said Paul, “you are wrong. It is when people have no material hopes that the prosperity gospel best takes root.”

I’ve thought a lot about that conversation. Paul is right. And I have a responsibility to help

people turn away from such a blatant twisting of the true gospel of Christ. So do you.

We have a calling to speak the truth of the gospel plainly. Faith in Christ, for all its blessings, is not an automatic ticket to great wealth or perfect health. We also have a second responsibility. We must come alongside those who are in poverty and offer our help in creating healthy communities where both physical and spiritual needs are met and life in all its dimensions can flourish. After all, Jesus reminds us that as we serve “the least” among us, we serve him.

Lord, help us to care for others in such a way that we show the truth of the gospel in all we do. Help us to serve you. In your name, Amen.

## ON THE CUTTING EDGE OF THE KINGDOM

*Our struggle is . . . against the rulers . . . the powers of this dark world and . . . the spiritual forces of evil . . . —Ephesians 6:12*

There is a new kind of hidden warfare today—cyber war. This war is fought from behind a computer screen, as websites important to national security are hacked in attempts to bring down key parts of a country's infrastructure.

Another kind of warfare that we don't always see is as old as human history. It's the battle between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. We enter this battle whenever we proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

Often the violent clash between these kingdoms is most evident in places of the world where the gospel is making its way for the first time. I hear reports from our African and Indian staff about demonic exorcisms and miraculous healings. I don't discount those reports. This is what I would expect to hear from the

front lines of battle against Satan and his demonic armies.

Such reports make me more aware of spiritual warfare that is also happening closer to home. As the devil is driven back, he likes to "go underground" and engage in guerrilla warfare. In fact, Paul says the devil's approach is to mask himself as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). But his identity and purpose are still that of "a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8).

Lord, open our eyes to see the ways the devil is attacking my own life and community. Help me to resist by your power, knowing that the devil flees from the strong name of Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

## GUILT AND GRACE

*I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD." And you forgave the guilt of my sin.*  
—Psalm 32:5

I wandered into the courtyard of a Buddhist temple outside Tokyo and was stunned by the sight of hundreds of small statues of the Buddha lining the sidewalks. Was this deep devotion to the Buddha?

Our Japanese ministry leader explained to me that the statues were left by women who had had abortions. They had brought the statues in the hope of atoning for their decisions to abort. That sobered me. It reminded me that a moral compass is embedded within everyone's heart. And when we do not chart our lives by that compass, we feel genuine guilt.

David spoke to that reality in Psalm 32. He had made a total mess of his life. His moral failures included adultery and murder. David acknowledged that when we mess up, we are eaten up inside if we keep quiet. Like

the women who brought their statues to the temple, David had an inner urge to confess his sin.

David confessed his sin to the Lord. Yes, there were people in his life with whom David needed to come clean. But only God could grant the full pardon his soul craved. When we mess up, our guilt is first of all toward our Creator, whose law we have violated.

How do you find real forgiveness? Not by way of an offering at a Buddhist temple. Confess to God—and he will forgive the guilt of your sin.

Lord, we can't cover our sins, but by the blood of Christ you can. Bless us with the grace of your forgiveness and wash us clean. Amen.

## THE COST OF HOLINESS

*Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*  
—2 Timothy 3:12

I pulled into the parking lot of a large Indonesian church to lead in worship. Uniformed men in white gloves directed us to our parking space. How nice, I thought to myself. I had seen parking attendants at North American churches, but none that looked so smartly dressed. Later in the day, when men in similar garb met us at a second congregation, I turned to our Indonesian ministry leader and said, “These aren’t parking attendants, are they?” He chuckled and said, “No, of course not. They are guards.”

Indonesia is not the most dangerous place to confess Christ. But over the past ten years, hundreds of churches in that country have been burned to the ground. For some of us, persecution of the church is a chapter from a history book. But for Christians in Indonesia, and in many other

lands, the threat of persecution is a part of daily obedience to Jesus.

While we might be shocked that persecution still exists, Paul wouldn’t be. Paul considered persecution a natural consequence of living for Jesus. In a way, we are called to be “eccentric” for Christ’s sake. *Eccentric* literally means “out of center.” As Christians, we have left behind the old center of a secular life to find a new center in Christ’s holiness. And we boldly live out that central commitment, regardless of the cost.

That makes me wonder why I’m not feeling more persecution for my faith!

Father, bless all who experience great pressure because of their faith in Jesus. Help us all to be your witnesses. Amen.

**DINNER'S READY!**

*"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."*

—Luke 15:2

How do you connect with people who are different from you? One way is to sit together and share a meal. When you do, of course, it will help to be a bit adventure-some in your choice of cuisine. I've dined on jellyfish legs and raw horsemeat (both were quite good, actually). I've sat down to green porridge with coconut milk, and I've eaten a fruit called durian, which tastes something like green cheese custard.

The importance of sharing a meal is often lost in North American society. But as I visit international Christian communities, I see the importance they attach to meeting together over dinner. Perhaps these Christians are more aware than me of the dynamic in Luke 15. The Pharisees were shocked that Jesus had dinner with tax collectors, notorious for exploiting their own people, and with

prostitutes and other sinners. Jesus' accusers understood that he was taking a stand for community, especially with those who were despised and ostracized by the religious leaders. (See Luke 5:30-32.)

I wonder whether an important part of our fellowship has been lost because we don't regularly share meals with each other. Are you missing an element of Christian community that can be forged only around the dinner table? Is there someone you need to invite for a meal?

Lord, may the fellowship of the Lord's Supper spill over into our everyday relationships, especially with people who need to know you. Help us to practice the hospitality of sharing meals, for your sake. Amen.

**AND IN FIRST PLACE . . .**

*"Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me . . . ."*  
—Matthew 10:37

I was talking recently to a Japanese pastor involved in our media ministry. He shared his personal story of coming to faith in Christ. As a young teen, confused about life, he began to explore the gospel through our radio programs. Eventually, he contacted our staff and professed his faith in Christ. Later, he said, he decided he also needed to pursue God's call to pastoral ministry. Then, he added, with tears in his eyes, that what motivated him were Jesus' words "Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me."

I was moved by his testimony. Having been raised in a Christian family, my decisions to confess Christ and eventually pursue Christian ministry were met with happy affirmation by my family. For my Japanese friend, it was the opposite. His

Christian commitments deeply strained his connections with people that he loved.

Although my sacrifice did not take the same form as his, the dynamic of sacrifice is operative in the life of every disciple. Perhaps my sacrifice for the kingdom of God is not with family ties. But for me too, Jesus claims first place. What competes in my own life with his lordship?

There can be no love in our lives greater than the love of Christ. There can be no commitment greater than his kingdom.

Lord, help me tear away all competitors to your place in my life. Lead me to discover ultimate joy in focusing on your lordship in all I do. Amen.

## KINGDOM ALIGNMENT

*There before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language.*

—Revelation 7:9

Sergei, our Russian ministry leader, was conducting me through an art gallery in downtown Moscow. As we visited a room that displayed art from the Soviet era, he paused before a large canvas that showed young adults, from different parts of the old Soviet Union, carrying high a flag, with broad smiles on their faces.

“Do you see this painting?” he asked. “This painting portrayed the hope of communism: diverse people from across the Soviet Union, united by the same political ideology, living together in harmony under the communist banner.”

Of course, we know that communism didn't have the power to deliver on that vision. In fact, no ideology, including socialism, capitalism, or libertarianism, is able to deliver on that kind of vision.

The hope of that vision is fulfilled only in Christ. The key to ethnic and national unity is in the picture described in Revelation 7, with people of all nations “standing before the throne and before the Lamb,” and with the same song on their lips.

How do you overcome the world's divisions? We no longer think another round of high-level political talks will do much good. We need a rediscovery of the Revelation vision. In spite of its fragmentation, the church of Christ is God's sign of the unity he intends for all peoples.

Lord, keep us from running after answers that fail to deliver. May our worship this Sunday be a foretaste of that glorious day when all nations sing to Christ the same song of salvation. Amen.

**PASS IT ON**

*The God of all comfort . . . comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble . . . .*

—2 Corinthians 1:3-4

While visiting a church in Brazil, I had an opportunity to meet a woman who was worshipping there for the first time. She had come to Sao Paulo for cancer surgery—scared and afraid of what the future held. She didn't know anyone in the city, but she reached out to others through a phone ministry run by our media staff. She came to faith in Christ, and now was attending worship for the first time. Later I heard that her cancer was in remission and she was involved in staffing the same phone ministry that helped in leading her to Christ.

Her experience mirrors our text from 2 Corinthians 1. Paul speaks honestly about suffering. The Christian faith does not give us an escape from the tough stuff of life. In fact, we are so connected with Jesus that the “sufferings of Christ”

will become part of our own stories. But Paul explains that where suffering flows, there also the comfort of Christ overflows! This encouraging consolation comes from the Father—and once we've received it, we're empowered to share it with others!

The amazing thing about the Christian life is that the more you share the comfort of God with others, the more it will bubble forth from your own heart.

With whom can you share God's comfort today?

Lord, make us channels of your peace and comfort. Because we have received much, may we give freely, and so be prepared to receive even more. Amen.

## HIDDEN BELIEVERS

*"I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal . . ."*  
—1 Kings 19:18

Elijah was burned out. After confronting the prophets of Baal and winning a great victory, Elijah had thought Ahab's pitiful kingdom would totter and fall. Not so. Instead, he had to run for his life. (See 1 Kings 18:16-19:9.) Elijah fled to Mount Horeb (Sinai), and there, standing before God, he cried out, "I am the only one left."

Really? God helped him do the math. The Lord had seven thousand people in Israel who had not bowed to Baal.

Our near-sightedness can get in the way of seeing the far scope of God's work in the world today. For example, did you know there are more than 12 million Christians in the Middle East? Every few years, I am privileged to meet with Christians from all over the Middle East who gather for fellowship and ministry planning. This is what they say

to me: "We are forgotten by our brothers and sisters around the world." One of my promises to them is to let fellow believers know that they exist, and to encourage prayers on their behalf.

How can we mobilize our resources of prayer and support to encourage their witness in the very part of the world where Christianity was born? Remember our brothers and sisters in the Middle East!

Lord, forgive our tendencies to ignore people we cannot see. Unite us by your Spirit with Christians in countries we might think are empty of the church's presence. We know that you love them too. Amen.

## JOY IN UNDERSTANDING

*All the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them. —Nehemiah 8:12*

How important is it to you to know the Bible's message?

Even though the Scriptures had been given to Israel and, with it, the knowledge of what it meant to keep covenant with God, that knowledge had been lost during Israel's captivity in Babylon. But now, in a remarkable worship experience, Ezra the teacher read the law, and the Levites unpacked its meaning. The response of the people was tears of repentance, until Nehemiah announced this was a time of celebration. Why? Because the people now understood the meaning of God's Word.

That episode came to my mind when I participated in the graduation ceremony of 600 students from our Bible study program in Congo. What struck me was the joy these students and their families had. Many had prepared special outfits for

the occasion. As they testified to what their study of God's Word had done for them, they radiated joy. They now understood the teachings of God's Word. Marriages had been healed, and families restored. Church leaders had matured in the faith for greater service.

I wondered whether we find so much joy in the study of God's Word. Has it been neglected where you live? If so, what can you do to change that?

Lord, forgive us if we have neglected your Word. May we study it with joy, anticipating new discoveries each time we open it. Open our eyes, in Jesus' name. Amen.

## THE EXCLUSIVE CHRIST

*"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*  
—John 14:6

We were walking through a large Buddhist temple in Japan. One of my colleagues had commented on the remarkable wood carvings that blended imagery from various religions. Our tour guide paused and said, "Why not! Christianity, Buddhism, Shintoism—all religions are the same!"

You don't need to visit a Buddhist temple to hear such talk. The notion that all religions are basically the same is held by a lot of Westerners and others throughout the world. There are different roads up the mountain, they say, but all the roads lead to the same peak.

Christians must respectfully disagree. Not because of intolerance, but because followers of Christ take the words of their Master seriously. "I am the way and the truth and the life," said Jesus. And to make sure we

know the extreme implications of his claim, he added, "No one comes to the Father except through me."

This claim of Christ, perhaps more than any other, is the rock over which many people stumble. Jesus sounds so elitist, so superior. Is this claim really necessary? Yes! Because no religious teacher, no spiritual guru, has done what Jesus has done. Only he was crucified for our sin and raised for our justification. No so-called spirit guide has gone to hell and back for the salvation of his people. Only Christ.

Jesus' claims *are* exclusive. Is your commitment to him equally so?

Lord Jesus, give us courage to confess you alone, in whose name we pray. Amen.

## PRAYER POWER

*The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God's people, went up before God from the angel's hand.*

—Revelation 8:4

During a visit to the temple of Naristan in Japan, I witnessed a Buddhist fire ritual. Worshipers were invited to write their prayers on slats of wood. Amid chanting and the beat of drums, those sticks became the fuel for the ritual fire. The rising smoke symbolized the rising prayers of the worshipers to the "Unmovable Wisdom King."

The scene reminded me of the worship described in Revelation 8, in which the twenty-four elders, symbolizing the church, hold bowls of incense representing the prayers of the people. An angel, holding a censer, offers the prayers up to God.

People everywhere have an inner need to pray. So, what's the difference between the prayers of Christ's people and the prayers offered through that fire ceremony? The difference is that Christian prayer is of-

fered in the name of the triune God. It is prayer offered to the Father, through the Son, and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer is essentially conversation with God. Prayer as a human ritual isn't enough. Our prayer needs to be offered to the God who invites our fellowship, welcomes our praise, and is delighted to show repentant children the joy of his forgiving grace. Prayer needs to be directed to the God who truly listens to his children.

Prayer is so important that we need to practice it "continually" (see 1 Thessalonians 5:17).

Lord, thank you for hearing our prayers. May they be a sweet offering of praise and intercession to you, our triune God, in whose name we pray. Amen.

## FINDING JESUS

*"The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me."*  
—Matthew 26:11

My walk through the train station in India brought me back to the first century. A paralyzed beggar was slowly dragging his way down the sidewalk. I've seen beggars in other countries, but for me, the poverty and suffering in India stand out. Whether on city streets, or begging for a few rupees at a stop light, the crushing sense of poverty in India must mirror what Jesus encountered daily in his earthy ministry.

Jesus would not be surprised by what I saw. After all, he said shortly before his crucifixion, "The poor you will always have with you." It's easy for me to take those words as a reason to become callous to people in poverty. I'm tempted to look the other way simply to keep my own emotional balance.

But Jesus wasn't defending my tendency to ignore human need. He was responding to

a special act of devotion that prepared him for his coming death. His point was that this lavish gift could not always be given to himself personally. On the other hand, because of sin in this world, the poor will surround us until his coming again. Serving them is a tangible way we can serve Christ.

In the face of pressing needs, it is sometimes difficult to know the best ways to help the poor escape the cycle of poverty. But if we fail to respond and engage their needs, we will fail our Savior.

Lord, the needs of the world's poor overwhelm us. But, beginning with the cup of cold water offered in your name, help us to pursue answers that open doors to hope. In your name, Amen.

## THE ONE AND ONLY

*"This is what the LORD says— . . . I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God."*  
—Isaiah 44:6

I had been in Hindu temples before with their many images of gods and goddesses. But this was the first time I saw the idols being tended by worshipers. Images were being carefully dusted, and new floral leis were placed around their necks. Fresh bowls of fruit were set out as evening offerings.

As I watching these daily rituals, the words of the prophet Isaiah hit home. Perhaps no prophet is as hard on idolatry as Isaiah. He points out the nonsense of splitting a log and using half to make yourself a god and the other half to cook your dinner. Half the log spares the worshiper from the evening chill. The other half, fashioned into an idol, is appealed to for eternal salvation. Isaiah diagnoses the problem: eyes are "plastered over so they cannot see." Spiritual blindness makes even

obvious truth seem an incomprehensible mystery.

All this doesn't seem to be my problem, until I come back to verse 8, where God says to his people, "You are my witnesses." Given what we know, and what we have experienced as God's redeemed people, we are witnesses of the truth to those who are blinded by the gods of this world. Our God is first and last—there is no other—and we need to let that be known.

Idolatry isn't something to snicker about. It should make us weep. And witness.

Lord, forgive us if we ridicule others' beliefs. Help us to see the pain of those who live without hope and without you in this world. Amen.

## GOD'S ADOPTED FAMILY

*"I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."*

—John 14:18

In Indonesia nearly two hundred listener communities have formed in response to our radio work. Groups of listeners meet on a regular basis to worship, study messages heard through radio, and fellowship with each other. Often these groups become open doors through which Hindu and Muslim seekers explore the claims of Jesus Christ.

Last February I gathered with a very special listener community. It was a group of orphans from a nearby orphanage. I listened as one young man shared what the group meant to him and how he had been spiritually nurtured through the radio broadcasts. The pain and rejection of being an orphan had been healed through the accepting grace of Jesus Christ.

You and I have a lot in common with that teenager, even if we have never lived in an or-

phanage or foster home. One of our deepest spiritual fears is to be deserted, rejected by God. Jesus' disciples were excited about their relationship with Jesus because he was their tangible link into God's family. But if he left this earth after his resurrection, then what?

That young man testified that, by the Spirit, Christ is with him today. By the Spirit, Christ has given him a place in God's family. He might never be able to trace his biological ancestry. But he is no longer an orphan. Neither are you or I when the Spirit enfolds us into the one family that truly matters.

Lord, when we feel alone, reassure us by your Spirit that we are sons and daughters of the King. Amen.

## THE CIRCLE BROKEN

*Having disarmed the powers and authorities, [Christ] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*

—Colossians 2:15

In Buddhism, a thangka painting typically portrays the wheel of life—the historic representation of the nature of human existence. Central to the painting is the circle of life, which has no beginning or end. Life with its endless reincarnations is a spinning wheel that never stops. Perhaps most ominous about the thangka is that the hands and feet of the devil grip the wheel from behind. It's obvious who is in control of such a spinning history of futility.

In my office I have a painting by a Christian from Tibet who created a very different thangka. In this thangka, the wheel of life has been invaded by Christ's incarnation and transcended by Christ's resurrection. And the hands and feet of the devil are broken free from the wheel. As our text states, Christ disarmed "the powers and authorities" and "made a public spectacle of

them, triumphing over them by the cross."

Billions of people in our world think that life has no real purpose—that we're like hamsters on a spinning wheel, running forever in meaningless circles. But history is under God's control; it had a beginning and will have an end. The devil's defeat means a world in which all things are made new—even the likes of you and me.

Lord, thank you for the invasion of your grace into our broken world. Thank you that the powers of darkness are broken and that we live today in the assurance of the coming of the kingdom of light. Amen.

## TEAMWORK

*"I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow."*  
—1 Corinthians 3:6

Often when I meet with our international teams, I read Paul's words from Philippians 1. Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles. He was an unlikely eyewitness to the resurrection and one "abnormally born" into Christian service (1 Corinthians 15:8). His special calling might have made him think he was God's army of one!

But Paul knew he couldn't fulfill his mission alone. So he built teams of fellow workers in every city he visited. While you and I often give thanks for the *things* God gives us, Paul gave thanks for the *people* God gave him to further his mission! In our text, Paul acknowledges that the teamwork of the first century involved not only himself and a gifted preacher, Apollos, but also another indispensable partner: God himself. God is the master gardener who brings about the incredible growth of his church!

I give thanks for the more than 200 staff persons Back to God Ministries International has around the world. I give thanks for the more than 800 volunteers who work with us. It's their faithfulness, blessed by God's grace, that has made mission happen.

Ask yourself today, "What team has God put me on? With whom am I working to further the gospel?" Not even Paul could go it alone. Pray that God connects you with other believers so that in using your gifts together, you may be used of Jesus.

Lord, align us in your kingdom with the right people to do the job you intend for us. May your kingdom grow! Amen.

## NOTES



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