

Jan/Feb 2013

Today

refresh, refocus, renew



WITH GOD
THROUGH
THE PSALMS

ALSO: THE GREATEST THING

Friends:

While on a bicycle tour with thousands of other riders, I got impatient and took a detour. The planned route took an odd loop in what seemed the wrong direction, adding ten miles to the ride. So I left the group to try a shortcut and headed cross-country. Of course, I discovered the reason for the detour—the road was torn up, and a bridge was out. Rather than ride my bike, I had to carry it through mud and across a river. It could have been dangerous at another time of year. My impatience led me to obstacles that could have been perilous.



As we start out this new year, we'll be looking in January at lots of different experiences as we reflect on the Psalms. Life is full of highs and lows, wins and failures, praises and laments—and Psalms gives voice to them all. These songs and prayers not only share God's advice and comfort but also help us find a voice when we ignore wisdom and need help getting back on track.

Then in February we'll explore love as "the greatest thing." We can have many gifts and accomplish great feats, but without love of God and neighbor, our virtues amount to nothing. God's love in action is the way to make a lasting difference in this world.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

—Steven Koster

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**“With God Through
the Psalms”**
Arthur J. Schoonveld



“The Greatest Thing”
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reFRAME MEDIA

this month

With God Through the Psalms

Arthur J. Schoonveld

This month's devotions are dedicated to the memory of a close friend and colleague, the late Rev. Robert Heerspink, former director of Back to God Ministries International and editor of *Today*. Bob was the person who gave me this assignment, and he was to have edited them. It was not to be. In October 2011 the Lord called him home after a short battle with cancer.

In these devotions we'll take a look at some of the more familiar psalms and listen carefully to those who wrote them. And as we listen, we'll meet people like us: ordinary people who go through life experiencing highs and lows and ups and downs, people who know the same emotions we all feel: joy, sadness, anger, confusion, depression, and more. But these people always find their way back to the Lord because he refuses to let go.

It is our prayer that as you read and reflect on these psalms and devotional readings, you will recognize yourself and be drawn closer to the Lord.

Art Schoonveld is a retired pastor in the Christian Reformed Church. Before retirement he served churches in California, Illinois, and Michigan. Since then, he has worked part-time for the denomination and has served as an interim pastor. Art and his wife, Anita, have four children and thirteen grandchildren.

NEW YEAR'S CONFIDENCE

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

—Psalm 46:1

Happy New Year! That's how many of us will greet each other on this first day of a new year. Perhaps you've already said that to a family member or friend.

But we need much more than a casual greeting as we stand at the beginning of a new year. We need to know that also in this coming year someone greater than any ruler of any nation is in control—not only of our lives but also of the course of history. Psalm 46 reminds us that in the midst of the many uncertainties in life the God of heaven and earth is in complete control.

The psalmist does not make false promises. He does not guarantee that things will go our way. He does not tell us that this new year will bring peace and prosperity. He does not promise the end of persecution and poverty. He makes clear that “nations are in up-

roar” and there will be desolation and destruction. Nations will fall, and rulers will come and go. But, come what may, God will be in charge. He will be “our refuge and strength.”

How do we know? One week ago we celebrated the birth of our Lord Jesus, the day on which the Son of God “moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14, *The Message*). His coming is our guarantee that God will always be our “ever-present help in trouble.”

Lord, our God, thank you for a new year, and thank you for your promise to be “our refuge and strength” because of Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

COUNTING OUR DAYS

Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

—Psalm 90:12

According to a statistic published some time ago, the average life span of people in the United States is 25,550 days (70 years). Some of us are already past that number, while others may never reach it. My calculator tells me that as of today I have lived 28,080 days. Perhaps you want to check just how many days you have already lived.

As we count our days, we are reminded that they are limited. As someone once put it, "Life is a temporary assignment."

That's why the psalmist asks the Lord to help us number our days—so we will realize we have been given only limited time here on this earth. The psalmist wants us to remember that what really matters is how we use the days he gives us.

And that raises some important questions: How will we use the remaining 364 days of this year? Will we use them in the way the Lord wants us to? Will we use them to serve him and to serve the people God places on our path? Are we willing to use our gifts and talents, our resources and our time to build his kingdom in whatever place he puts us?

We are not given another year simply to take up space. Wherever we may find ourselves, God wants to use each one of us. Ask yourself today, "How does God want to use me?"

Father in heaven, help us to understand that you have given us another year to serve you. Make us faithful in our calling. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

GOD KEEPS NO RECORD

If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness.
—Psalm 130:3-4

Recently I heard of a young man in his thirties who tragically took his own life. Something happened that made his life seemingly unbearable, and the guilt he felt was crushing him.

More Christians than we know go through life carrying a load of guilt. Some feel there is no hope because of something they did.

A long-time friend commented to me that he was sure that when he died, the Lord would not accept him. He was weighed down with guilt because he felt he had wasted his life. Shortly before his death, a close relative told me that this friend was sure there was no hope for him because, as he put it, “so much had gone wrong” in his life.

According to Psalm 130, however, we don’t have to carry

the weight of our sins. We don’t even have to get rid of our sins. God has done it for us.

“If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness.” God keeps no record. He has pushed the delete button on our sins, and because of the Lord Jesus, our Savior, God has wiped our record clean. The apostle John put it this way: “If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins” (1 John 1:9). That’s the good news for all of us!

Thank you, Lord, for not keeping a record of my sins. Help me to confess and to receive your forgiveness through Jesus Christ, my Lord. In his name, Amen.

ROAD MAP FOR OUR JOURNEY

Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.

—Psalm 119:105

A year ago this month the cover of *Time* magazine announced a “User’s Guide: Essential Info for the Year Ahead.” The cover story was intended “to offer a road map for the next 12 months.” It pointed to some of the major happenings of the past year, and it gave suggestions on how to avoid pitfalls.

According to Psalm 119, you and I have been given a road map and a user’s guide for the coming year as well: the Word of God. It offers some of the most essential information—not just for the year ahead, but also for all of life. “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.” Without the Word of God, we would stumble around in darkness.

God’s Word, the Bible, points us to “the Word” (Jesus) who “became flesh” (John 1:14), but it also tells us how God,

our Maker, wants us to live. In 2 Timothy 3:16-17 Paul reminds us that “all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” so that you and I “may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

We need to learn to read the Bible not merely for daily devotions but also as God’s road map for our lives. God does not leave us to stumble around in darkness. Turn to God’s Word every day, because it is a lamp for our feet and a light for our path.

Lord, our God, thank you for your Word. Compel us to read it so that we may walk in the light of our Lord Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.

CAN GOD BE TRUSTED?

*But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me.*

—Psalm 13:5-6

In his book *How Can It Be All Right When Everything Is All Wrong?* Lewis Smedes tells about a visit to a dying friend. When leaving the hospital room, he heard his friend say, "It's going to be all right." It was his friend's way of saying, "I'm trusting in God. He knows what he is doing."

But sometimes trusting God is easier said than done. When your health is failing, or you lose someone you love, or your job is on the line, or something happens to your child, it's not always easy to say, "But I trust in your unfailing love." When life becomes a valley, it can be a challenge to "sing the LORD's praise."

And yet the only way to live is by trusting the Lord. You can't trust your health or your investments because they can fail you at any time. You can't bank on

your government because its power is quite limited. The only one we can really trust is the Lord. He never fails us.

Some years ago a friend gave me a lesson in trust. She had been told that she had only six months to live. I expected her to be devastated. Instead, she read Psalm 13:5-6 to me. It was God's grace that enabled her to say, "I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me."

Ask the Lord for his grace to trust him in this coming year.

Lord, our God, please give us the grace we need to trust you. You know exactly what we need. In Jesus' name, Amen.

TIME OUT FOR WORSHIP

Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.

—Psalm 100:1-2

Today, in almost every country, millions of people will come together in chapels and in churches, indoors and outdoors, to worship God. Others, not able to join in, will worship God by way of radio or television or Internet. For Christians, Sunday is a day to worship.

Sadly, not everyone feels the need to worship. A Christian college student told me that public worship was a waste of time. “Christians,” she said, “should be out there doing something worthwhile instead of sitting in church.” When I asked someone why he had not been in church for the past 18 years, he simply said, “There’s nothing there for me.”

So why worship? Psalm 100 gives the answer. Worship is our imperfect way of acknowledging who God is. It is our way of saying thank-you to God for

all he has done for us through Jesus Christ. Worship is intended to give God his due.

And when we worship, we “worship the LORD with gladness,” with hearts filled with joy and gratitude. Psalm 100 gives us several reasons: God made us; we belong to him. The Lord is good; his love endures forever. God’s faithfulness continues through all generations.

Make sure you worship this God today and every day!

Lord, thank you for the freedom to worship you publicly. Bless those who do not have this freedom or who are not able to join with others. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.

THE FOOL SAYS . . .

The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."

—Psalm 14:1

Some time ago someone who was raised in a Christian family told me that she no longer believed in God. She had just come home from a funeral, and what she had heard there clinched it for her. Her teenage son, standing next to her, said that he no longer believed in God either.

The question: How does it happen that someone brought up in a Christian home could come to that conclusion?

A recent news article reported on a group of some 400 baby boomers who came together to sing some of the psalms and hymns they had been taught as children. They came not because they believed in what the songs said, but simply to remember their past. The article stated that these singers had been raised in Christian homes but had given up on the faith of their parents. One person

was quoted as saying that some of the lyrics they were singing were sheer nonsense.

How sad! How arrogant! How foolish! Sad, because they chose to go through life without God's nearness. Arrogant, because they refused to accept what God has revealed to us in the Bible and in creation. And foolish, because without God people have no hope.

Pray for all who refuse to believe in the Lord. Take every opportunity to tell them about the living God, who reaches out in love through his Son, the Lord Jesus. Show through your life that God is alive!

Lord, give us the faith to believe, and help us to show others that you are alive in our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.

GOD OWNS IT ALL

"If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it."
—Psalm 50:12

In a message on stewardship, a pastor recently encouraged us to go home, look around, and give thanks for what we have.

He wanted us to give thanks to God for letting us live in homes that belong to him and for allowing us to drive cars that really are his. He wanted us to thank God for our paychecks, our businesses, our jobs, our savings, and our investments. He wanted us to acknowledge God as the owner of all things.

That's the teaching of Psalm 50, that God is the absolute owner of everything we have. "The world is mine, and all that is in it," says the Lord. God owns "the cattle on a thousand hills." He is the owner of absolutely everything we have. We are no more than managers. As one author put it, "God never turned the deed or title over to us."

Take a few moments today to look at everything you have. Take out your checkbooks and your bank statements, and ask yourself: Am I living as someone who knows he is not the owner? Do I use my resources to build God's kingdom and to help those in need?

Remember the words of Jesus: "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33).

Ask him to help you be a faithful steward.

Lord, thank you for allowing us the use of so many things. Help us to be faithful as we manage the things you own. In Jesus' name, Amen.

CONFRONTED TO CONFESS

Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.
—Psalm 51:4

It took a special visit from the prophet Nathan to confront King David with the consequences of his sin and bring him to confession. The story is found in 2 Samuel 11-12. David had taken someone else's wife, and to cover up the sin, he arranged for her husband to be killed in battle. Then it was business as usual for David—until the prophet of the Lord confronted him.

That confrontation led David to write Psalm 51, a confession of his sins. "I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." The psalm is also a plea for mercy: "Have mercy on me, O God."

David also asks the Lord to create in him a pure heart and a steadfast spirit to keep him from sinning.

Sometimes it takes a special confrontation to bring us to confession. Perhaps someone needs to confront us with what we have done. Perhaps, like David, we have carried on as if nothing happened. Perhaps we need to confront a relative or friend who does not realize how he or she has sinned against God.

Whatever it takes, we need to come clean, confess, and ask for a new beginning. When we do, we will experience God's mercy!

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love. . . . Blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin," because of Jesus. Amen.

A PRAYER FOR EVERY CHRISTIAN

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
—Psalm 51:10

"It happened to me because I did not think it could happen to me." That's what someone said to me after getting involved in a relationship that almost destroyed his marriage. He never thought anything like that could ever happen to him.

He's not alone. It's easy to think we are immune to sin and temptation. Many of us go to church and try to live right. Sometimes we even shake our heads when others fall into sin, and more than one Christian has said, "That will never happen to me." But that's when we become extremely vulnerable. Paul warns against that when he says, "Watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted" (Galatians 6:1).

We would do well to make David's prayer in verses 10-11 our daily prayer. No matter how strong we might think we are or however good our in-

tentions might be, in our own strength we are no match for Satan. David was speaking from experience when he prayed, "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me."

Take some time over the next few days to memorize that prayer, or write it out and put it on your refrigerator door or bathroom mirror. Pray it often. Only with the Holy Spirit do we have the power to resist temptation.

"Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me." For Jesus' sake, Amen.

DO CHRISTIANS GET DEPRESSED?

*Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God.*

—Psalm 42:5

In a sermon, I commented on Psalm 42, saying that sometimes Christians get depressed. The next day someone called to tell me I was wrong. He said, "A Christian has no business being depressed." He was sure that to be depressed showed a lack of faith.

Fortunately, the Bible does not share that view. It presents God's people just the way they are: sometimes angry or confused, and sometimes bitter or depressed. According to 1 Kings 19, the prophet Elijah was so depressed that he asked God to let him die. And in our reading today the psalmist says, "Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?"

When my mother died suddenly after a one-week illness, and when three years later one of my brothers was killed at age 24, my dad became very de-

pressed. Throughout my years of ministry I have met many Christians who, like the psalmist, were "downcast" and "disturbed." It is not something to be ashamed of or to feel guilty about. When we become depressed, we have to do what the psalmist did: we have to hope in God. He provides the help we need through others whom he equips with gifts of counseling and understanding.

Don't be afraid to ask for help. Be assured that God cares about how you feel. Ask him to open your eyes to the provisions he makes available.

Lord, today we pray for all who suffer from depression and for those who try to minister to them. Help them to know there is hope. Amen.

ON HOLY GROUND

Though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter, you will restore my life again.
—Psalm 71:20

Sometimes it takes a special event to really understand a Bible passage. It happened to us on a Saturday morning in a local hospital. We had been asked to come because a close friend was dying. The moment we walked into his room, we knew that we were standing on holy ground.

While standing around his bed, his wife asked for someone to read Psalm 71. A sister-in-law began reading, and we heard the words, “Though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter, you will restore my life again.” Those words spoke to me in a way they never had before.

During his short illness there were “troubles, many and bitter.” There had been many treatments and countless prayers for healing. But the time had come to let him go. It was one of the

most difficult moments for the family.

But in that final moment, through the words of Psalm 71, we were reminded that even in the face of death there is the sure promise of new life. “Though you have made me see troubles . . . you will restore my life again.” Life is filled with troubles, and death is indeed our last enemy, but through Jesus there is the hope of eternal life for the child of God.

What amazing grace—when even in the face of death we can speak of new life because Christ has conquered death!

Lord Jesus, thank you for the assurance that you have conquered death and will restore our lives even though we face death. We pray in your name. Amen.

NOT ABOUT US

Not to us, LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness.
—Psalm 115:1

“It’s not about you”—that’s how Rick Warren begins his best-seller *The Purpose Driven Life*. That’s what Psalm 115 means when it says, “Not to us, LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory.” Make sure God comes first in your life.

It sounds simple, but it really is very difficult.

We know it’s not about us and we want to put God first, but there are so many pressing needs and problems to deal with that before we even realize it, life becomes all about us. We know we have to put first things first when we pray, but often without thinking we put our own needs and our own wants first anyway. And sometimes we worry more about what people think of us than what God thinks of us.

It takes a right relationship with God to truly say, “Not to us, LORD, not to us.” The more we get to know him and the closer we grow to him, the easier it will become to be able to put God first. We have to recognize who God is and what he has done for us to help us redirect our priorities.

Reaching that point does not happen overnight. It’s a life-long process. We need to learn to pray as our Lord Jesus prayed when he said, “Not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42).

Lord, so much in our lives centers on ourselves. We often care more about what will happen to us than about your name’s honor. Please forgive us, for your name’s sake. Amen.

THE MAJESTY OF GOD

LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

—Psalm 8:1

Nearly five years ago my wife and I had the privilege of spending two weeks in Cairo, Egypt. The place where we stayed was across the street from an Islamic mosque. At noon on Friday, the holy day of the week for Muslims, men came flocking to the mosque. Some went inside, while others stayed outside, stopping traffic on the street. Each person spread a small mat in front of him, knelt on it, and for at least an hour kept bowing down to worship Allah.

It made me sad to know that they were praying not to the God who has become our Father through the Lord Jesus Christ, but to a demanding god they can never please. But at the same time I witnessed a sense of awe that these men felt for the god they had come to worship. It made me think of the words of Psalm 8: "LORD,

our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!"

It also made me wonder whether we have that sense of awe in our worship of the Lord. Do we grasp something of what Psalm 8 says about the majesty of God? Do we understand the words of Isaiah 6:3: "Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory"? Do we worship this awesome God without embarrassment or apology? He is our Father through the Lord Jesus, but he is also the God who reigns in splendor.

Lord God, help us to understand something about the majesty of your name, and make us willing to acknowledge your greatness without embarrassment. Because of Jesus, Amen.

DOES GOD HEAL ALL DISEASES?

Praise the LORD, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases.

—Psalm 103:2-3

About three years ago someone who was diagnosed with cancer asked that we come to anoint her with oil and to pray for healing. That afternoon a group of Christians came together in her living room to do what James 5:14 instructs. We anointed her with oil, we laid hands on her, and we prayed. It was one of the most moving worship times I had ever experienced.

But there was no healing of her body. The cancer did not stop, and she died some time later. Why no healing? What about the promise in Psalm 103 that the Lord heals all our diseases? Is that an empty promise?

Make no mistake: God does heal all our diseases. He heals the disease called sin.

He did not bring physical healing that afternoon for a cancer patient, but he gave her peace

of mind. He helped her overcome her fear of death. And he brought healing to the family by helping them to accept what was happening.

God does bring physical healing today. God has the power to heal at any time. The gospel accounts of Jesus' life and ministry (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) mention countless times when Jesus healed people. His miraculous healings are a foretaste of what is to come—and someday, when he comes again, he will indeed heal all our diseases (Revelation 21:4).

Father in heaven, help us to remember that Jesus came to heal our diseases, and help us to believe that someday every disease will be eradicated. Amen.

IS LIFE UNFAIR?

As for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
—Psalm 73:2-3

Sometimes life seems unfair. Sometimes you look around and wonder why some families experience one hardship after another while other families prosper.

Why is it that so many of us have everything we need while others have less than nothing?

Why is it that some people who care nothing about God live in luxury, while millions of people dedicated to the Lord are persecuted?

These are the very questions that torment the writer of Psalm 73. He did not understand: "As for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked."

He's not alone. Many Christians wrestle with that issue. A wife standing next to the casket of

her husband whispered to me, "This is not right."

So many things in life don't seem right or fair. That's why we need to keep our eyes on the Lord.

It was only when the psalmist focused on the Lord and came into God's presence that he began to understand. He did not find an answer to his questions. But he found peace in knowing that our lives are in the hands of the loving God who has become our Father through Jesus Christ. When life seems unfair, be sure to come into his presence.

Lord God, be close to all who struggle with hard questions today. Draw them into your presence. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

THE PEACE OF GOD IN STRESSFUL TIMES

In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety.
—Psalm 4:8

Several years ago I spent a week with my sister, who was dying of cancer. After a night of tossing and turning, she asked for a Bible verse that might give her peace of mind. Someone read Psalm 4:8 to her: “In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety.” That text gave her the peace she needed, and it became the text for her funeral message.

All of us need to experience the safety of the Lord—not only when we face death, but also in the daily challenges of life.

David, who wrote those words, knew all about the dangers facing us each day. He experienced much distress in his own life, and he knew there was no safety in life or in death without the Lord.

Perhaps you are experiencing some of the distress of Psalm 4. Perhaps you find yourself lying awake at night because of things that are happening in your life.

Perhaps you wonder about your health, your family, your job, your future.

Perhaps you dread what might come in the year ahead.

Turn to the Lord for the safety and security you need. He has promised to make us live in safety when we turn to him.

Father in heaven, be close to all who are experiencing the difficult challenges of life. Grant them the safety and security you offer through our Lord Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

DO WE ENJOY GOD'S PRESENCE?

Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him.

—Psalm 37:7

In *Seeking God's Face*, a devotional prayer book, author Philip Reinders urges readers to take the time each day to enjoy God's presence. Every day he invites us to "take refreshment in God's presence." In his own words the author is repeating what David says in today's verse: "Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him."

Most of us find ourselves too busy to be still and to wait patiently for the Lord. I urge you to take a few moments today to look back on the past week and see the amount of time you have spent enjoying God's presence. Maybe you rushed to work or hurried to get your kids to school or to some other activity. Maybe you had meetings to attend, appointments to keep, text messages to send, and emails to answer. You may have had games to go to and other

events to attend. When you glance back, do you see much time in which you focused on God's presence?

If not, perhaps a few changes are needed. What if you got up a few minutes earlier each day to pray? What if you spent a half-hour less watching television or texting or on the Internet to reflect on God and enjoy his presence? Some of us must learn to say "no" to some activities in our church or school. We need to discipline ourselves to be still before the Lord and to take the time to wait patiently for him.

Father in heaven, please help us make changes, if necessary, to spend more time enjoying your presence. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

NEVER AFRAID?

The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?

—Psalm 27:1

Psalm 27 encourages us to reason that we never need to be afraid. After all, when the “the LORD is the stronghold of my life,” what is there to fear?

But is it really possible to never be afraid?

Fear is a fact of life, even for believers, and being afraid is a part of most people’s lives. Even David, who wrote Psalm 27, is described elsewhere in the Bible as being “very much afraid” (1 Samuel 21:12).

Some children are afraid of the dark. Some parents fear for their children’s future. Some Christians are afraid of death, and some are afraid to face the future, expecting some tragedy to strike. A long-time Christian pastor, who suffers from Lou Gehrig’s disease, has written, “The more I think about the future, the more afraid I become.”

The only way to overcome our fears is to turn to God and to remember that God is the stronghold of our lives. And we do well to repeat these words from Hebrews 13:6: “We say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.’” We can also reread and repeat the words of Psalm 27: “The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?” When we ask for God’s help and look to his Word, we can trust that the Lord will be our stronghold.

Lord, there is so much in life to be afraid of. Help us to turn to you and to trust in you when fear overtakes us. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

GOD IS WHERE WE ARE

You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me.
—Psalm 139:5

No matter where we find ourselves, God is there. From the moment we get up until the time we go to bed, he is there. God knows our thoughts, and he even knows our words before we speak them. In the words of the psalmist, God is familiar with all our ways because he is where we are.

Some 3,000 years after David wrote this psalm, another Jewish author, Elie Wiesel, said just the opposite in his book, *Night*. While he suffered in a German concentration camp, he watched his mother and little sister led away to a gas chamber. Some time later he found himself in the same barracks where his father was beaten to death. Years later, when he wrote about what he saw, he said, "I was alone in a world without God."

But David insists that God is where we are. He says, "You

hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me." That's the reality of life: God is where we are. No matter how much evil we may face or how dark things may be, God has promised never to leave us or forsake us.

When it seems to you that this world is void of God, turn to God's Word, which tells us: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). His coming is the living proof that God is where we are. Accept God's invitation, and come to him (see Matthew 11:28-29).

Lord Jesus, thank you for coming into our world. Help us to find you. We pray in your name. Amen.

WHERE IS GOD WHEN IT HURTS?

If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you.

—Psalm 139:11

When life goes our way, it's not too difficult to confess that God is with us. But "where is God when it hurts?"—as Philip Yancey asks thoughtfully in one of his books.

Some years ago a person struggling with an addiction came to talk. He could not find God, and he said, "On Sundays you talk about a God who is where we are, no matter what, but he is not there for me. Where is this God?"

A married couple whose close relative had taken her own life was similarly puzzled. They asked, "Where was God during the final moments of her life?"

Sometimes it seems God is nowhere to be found. David, who wrote Psalm 139, also cried out in Psalm 22:1: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The Lord Jesus, hang-

ing on a cross, cried out the words of Psalm 22:1 as well: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).

But God is there even in our darkest moments. "If I say, 'Surely the darkness will hide me, and the light become night around me,' even the darkness will not be dark to you." Because of Jesus' willingness to be forsaken by his Father, you and I have the guarantee that he will never leave or forsake us. And when you doubt, re-read this psalm and claim his promise.

Lord, thank you for the assurance that you are with us even in our darkest moments. Help us to believe your hand will guide us. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

YOU ARE SPECIAL!

You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.
—Psalm 139:13

"You are not an accident." That's what Rick Warren says in one of his books. He goes on: "Your birth was no mistake or mishap, and your life is no fluke of nature. Your parents may not have planned you, but God did. He was not at all surprised by your birth. In fact, he expected it."

God expected us because he made us! While we were in our mother's womb, God himself shaped and molded us. The hands of God carefully crafted each of us in his own image.

Our existence is not an accident of nature. You and I are God's creatures, made in his image, and because of that every human life is sacred.

When the United States Supreme Court legalized abortion on demand 40 years ago today, it ignored the fact that to abort an unborn child is to push

away the hands of God and to interfere with the work of his creation. To abort an unborn child is to say "no" to God's creative design. To abuse or neglect a child created in God's image, or even to look the other way, is to forget that every human life is sacred.

You and I are special. We are not an accident. God himself made each one of us in his image to fulfill his plan in our lives.

Make sure you try to discover God's plan for you!

Father in heaven, thank you for creating us in your image. Help us to remember that we are special, and help us to seek your plan for our lives. Amen.

SAYING “NO” IS NOT ENOUGH

“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” —Matthew 19:14

One Sunday after I had preached against abortion, I found a letter on my desk. It was written by a police officer from a major city who had been in our church that morning. He wrote, “Don’t abuse my time telling me that abortion is wrong. I’ve heard it many times before.” He added, “Tell me what you are doing to promote adoption as well as other alternatives to abortion. What are you and your church doing for crack babies, for children who are abused, and for children who are shipped from foster home to foster home?”

A single mother also wrote, “I know abortion is wrong. But have you signed up to adopt a child? If not, why not? Have you volunteered to babysit for a single mother so she can go to work? Have you opened your door to a pregnant teen-

ager whose parents have kicked her out? Have you ever visited a home for abused and unwanted children or volunteered to answer calls from desperate teens looking for an alternative to abortion?”

Saying “no” to abortion is not enough. As followers of the Lord Jesus, we must remember that he wants us to welcome little children in his name, along with all others who may be vulnerable or disadvantaged. We all need to recognize how dependent we are on God, and we have to ask ourselves, “How does the Lord want me to show his love to all his children?” Then we must respond.

Lord, please open our eyes to opportunities to promote full life in your kingdom, and to respond with your love. Amen.

OUR GOD FORGIVES

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. —1 John 1:9

Several years ago a young woman came to my office. She was expecting a child, and she was afraid. At age 16 she had had an abortion, and now, in her twenties, she thought God might punish her by letting something happen to this new unborn child.

In the time since the abortion she had never talked about her past. She had never confessed it to the Lord to ask for his forgiveness. But now her guilt was overwhelming her, and she needed to confess.

She experienced what Psalm 32 expresses. The writer says, "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away." Until the psalmist confessed his sin, he could not go on. But finally he said to God, "I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. . . . And you forgave the guilt of my sin."

Unconfessed sin brings guilt. And guilt robs us of our peace and takes away our joy. It affects our health and our well-being.

Confession brings forgiveness—for each one of us. Whatever your sin may be, confess it to the Lord, and receive his forgiveness because of the Lord Jesus. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins."

If you are living with guilt, find someone to lead you into God's presence, to pray with you, and you will receive his forgiveness.

Lord, our God, thank you for your forgiveness through our Lord Jesus. Bring us to confess so that we too can be forgiven. Amen.

GOD'S GREAT LOVE

I will sing of the LORD's great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations.

—Psalm 89:1

Sometime today take a few moments to read and re-read the first eight verses of Psalm 89. As you do, take some time to think back on the week that's almost past, or even this past month, and reflect on the ways you have experienced God's amazing love and great faithfulness.

Our Lord expresses his love and faithfulness in many ways. We can experience it through the love of family members and close friends. We can see his faithfulness in how he helps us through the difficult experiences in life. God extends his great mercy each time he forgives us for the things we did wrong. He expresses his closeness each time we read his Word.

Of course, it's much easier to think about the things we do not have, or the times the Lord did not seem to answer our prayers, or the days when

it seemed we could not find God. But, through it all, the one faithful God was always there. Scripture sums it up this way: "Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22-23).

If for some reason you find it difficult to join in singing of God's great love and mercy, ask the Holy Spirit to open your eyes so that you too can see what God has done for you.

Father in heaven, help us to join in singing of your great love, and give us grace to talk about your faithfulness to the people around us. Amen.

GUARDING OUR MOUTH

Set a guard over my mouth, Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.
—Psalm 141:3

Several years ago at a conference for ministers we were told by a psychiatrist that ministers talk too much. More recently someone in our church who felt that the sermon had been too long said, “You ministers think that we hang on to your every word. Well, we don’t.” It was his way of saying that sometimes ministers talk too much, even when preaching.

Unfortunately it’s not only ministers who talk too much. Many of us are much better at talking than we are at listening. Some of us talk before we think, and sometimes we talk about things we don’t really know much about.

Job had to admit that he had talked too much when he said, “Surely I spoke of things I did not understand” (Job 42:3). Sometimes we are guilty of using what Ephesians calls “un-

wholesome talk,” and too often we say things that do not build anyone up but instead hurt the other person.

Some of us need to do what Job did: “I put my hand over my mouth,” he said (Job 40:4). Or as the psalmist does, we should ask the Lord to set a guard over our mouth. James suggests that we should be “quick to listen” and “slow to speak” (James 1:19). And Jesus says that one day we will have to give account for every empty or idle word we have spoken (Matthew 12:36). We all need God’s wisdom in how to speak—and how not to.

Please, Lord, set a guard over our mouths and keep watch over the door of our lips. Help us to speak wisely, that we may honor you. In Jesus, Amen.

WITH GRATITUDE TO GOD

What shall I return to the LORD for all his goodness to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD.

—Psalm 116:12-13

Twelve years ago today I retired as pastor of a local congregation. The verse I chose for the occasion was Psalm 116:12. Another version says, "How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me?" I wanted to express something of all the things God had done for me in my vocation as a minister.

The writer of this psalm gives many reasons why each of us should take the time to look back and say, "How can we possibly repay the Lord?" He is the God who, again and again, hears our cry for mercy. He continually turns his ear to us, listening to our prayers. When we are overcome by trouble and sorrow, he stands next to us. Through our Lord Jesus Christ he has delivered our souls from death, our eyes from tears, and our feet from stum-

bling. When we, because of sin, were in great need, he saved us.

Of course, the psalmist knows that we can never repay the Lord. And we don't have to, because the Lord Jesus paid the price of salvation and new life for us. The only thing we can do is express our gratitude to him. That's what the psalmist does. He promises to "lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD."

Be sure to take some time today and every day to call on God's name and give him thanks.

Lord, thank you for the gift of your Son, and for the many other gifts you have given us. Help us always to be grateful. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

PRAISE THE LORD

It is good to praise the LORD . . . proclaiming your love in the morning and your faithfulness at night. —Psalm 92:1-2

Psalm 92 is an invitation to begin and end each day by giving thanks to God for his love and faithfulness. *The Living Bible* paraphrases it this way: “Every morning thank him for his kindness, and every evening rejoice in all his faithfulness.”

But what if you don't look forward to a new day? It's easy to be thankful when everything is going our way. But what if your health is failing or you are confined to your home? Some people spend their days in bed, unable to do the things they want to do. How do you give thanks when life is nothing but a disappointment?

A friend showed me that it is possible to give thanks regardless. Every time I went to visit him, he would say, “God is so good.” That was his testimony, even though he had been confined to his bed for at least ten

years, unable to move. When I asked him how he could say that, he said, “When I became ill, I was bitter. I used to ask, ‘Why me?’ But God's grace has made it possible for me to thank him every day for his faithfulness.”

If it seems almost impossible to thank God, ask him for grace to learn to say thank-you in spite of your difficult circumstances. In Romans 8:39 the apostle Paul tells us why: nothing can “separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” That, says Paul, is reason enough to give thanks.

Lord, give us the grace to praise you in spite of what might happen to us. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

UNLESS THE LORD BUILDS

Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain.

—Psalm 127:1

In his prime, the heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali became rather well known for saying, “I am the greatest!” Years later, while suffering the effects of Parkinson’s disease, he took a visitor to see his many trophies and awards. Pointing to his trophies, he reportedly said, “It ain’t nothing.”

In that respect, Ali had it right.

Life is nothing unless we live it with and for the Lord.

That’s the point Psalm 127 makes when it says, “Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain.” This doesn’t mean we sit back and expect God to do all the work. At the beginning of a new year we need to look ahead and ask ourselves, “What would I like to accomplish in this year? And how will I go about it?”

But unless we plan with God, we will fail utterly. We need a higher goal than making a living, or getting ahead, or planning for retirement. We need to plan with God’s purpose in mind. As the writer of Proverbs states, “Many are the plans in a person’s heart, but it is the LORD’s purpose that prevails” (Proverbs 19:21).

God has a plan for us. We are called to be kingdom builders in this new year, each of us in our own way and in our own place. The question for all of us is, *How* will we use our gifts, our talents, our resources, and even our limitations to be a part of God’s building program?

Thank you, Lord, for inviting us to help in building your kingdom. Show us your plan, and help us to build with you. Amen.

LISTEN! LET ME TELL YOU

Come and hear, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me.
—Psalm 66:16

Some time ago someone in our family gave us a booklet specifically designed for us as grandparents to tell our story. The person who gave it wanted to make sure that our grandchildren would get to know that story.

The writer of Psalm 66 also wants to tell his story when he says, “Come and hear, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me.” The psalmist does not want to talk about his accomplishments or achievements. He wants to talk about what God has done for him throughout his life. His life had not been easy. He had been tested and refined like silver. He had experienced many burdens. But through it all God had been with him and had led him to “a place of abundance.”

Each of us has a story to tell. All of us can testify to hardships in

our lives—but also to the fact that God has always been there.

Make sure you tell your story. Make sure you tell about God’s presence in your life and about his amazing grace in the midst of trials. Tell it to your children and grandchildren.

Someone once said to me, “If something were to happen to my dad, I would not know anything about his relationship to God.” Don’t let that happen to you. Start writing or telling your story today!

Father in heaven, we have so much to tell because of your amazing grace in our lives. Help us to tell our story and point to you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.
—Psalm 23:1-3

Psalm 23 is the testimony of a child of God who knows that the Lord is with him always. It portrays the confident assurance that, come what may, in life and in death, this God will be the believer's shepherd. It shows why this psalm is one of the most familiar and most loved of all time.

David, himself a shepherd, knew about the relationship between a shepherd and his sheep. He knew that any shepherd worth his salt would do everything in his power to provide for his sheep and protect them.

That's who God is for David: a shepherd who makes sure that his sheep will have everything they need. He knows from experience that his shepherd God leads his people beside still waters and continually refreshes their souls. He knows that even

in the face of deadly enemies this shepherd will never leave him.

Psalm 23 points to the good shepherd, the Lord Jesus. In John 10:11 Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." And that's exactly what Jesus did. He laid down his life for each one of us.

With Jesus watching over us and always walking with us, "goodness and love" surely will follow us all the days of our lives. (See Matthew 28:20.)

Lord Jesus, thank you for becoming our good shepherd and laying down your life for us. Thank you for walking with us always, even through the valley of death. Amen.

this month

The Greatest Thing

Kevin Adams

Everyone talks about love. And everyone has an idea about what love is, or should be. Most people agree that “love makes the world go ‘round,” but we don’t always agree on exactly what love is.

In 1 Corinthians 13 the apostle Paul shows what love is by describing what love does. He shows us love wearing a business suit, a medical coat, or a janitor’s uniform. He shows us love walking in our ordinary world every day of the week.

This month let’s look at the qualities of love. As we do, we’ll see the good news in action, forming a new identity in us. It helps us to love those we care about and, in the spirit of Jesus, even those we don’t.

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OUR GREATEST NEED

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love
—1 Corinthians 13:1

I've talked to a lot of people who are fed up with the church. For some, church is a poor stand-in for a mountain hike on a beautiful Sunday morning. For others, church means little more than attending a worship service to keep a family member from nagging.

Even some who esteem the church value it like an Edsel. They venerate it because it's old, not because it's useful. Many agree with Winston Churchill, who said he related to the church rather like a flying buttress: "I support it from the outside." Some sympathize with the atheistic philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who, when asked what made him so negative toward Christians, said, "I would believe in their salvation if they looked a little more like people who have been saved."

So, is there any hope for the church? I don't ask as a cynic

who dodges and belittles the church, but as one who has promised to nurture and encourage its people. Augustine, a fourth-century skeptic who later became a leader in the church, spent years dashing his mother's hopes that he would join her in attending worship services. But eventually he came to value the church so deeply that he stated, "You cannot have God as your Father without having the church as your mother."

In light of this, let's restate our question more positively: What is the church's deepest need? How would you answer?

Forgive, O Lord, the church for its many foibles and failures. Give us grace to see it as you do. In Jesus' name, Amen.

IF NOT LOVE

If I . . . do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.
—1 Corinthians 13:1

For seven years I served on the board of a seminary. Our meetings often focused on the church's need for excellent communicators. Members of struggling congregations told us the main job of our seminary was to produce good preachers. "Effective communicators," they said, "are the key to healthy congregations."

We agreed that in the chaos of competing voices claiming to be trustworthy, the church needs leaders to speak the sure, clear Word of God. In a world where a thousand seductive voices call us away from what is wise and true, we need people to remind us of God's surprising, life-giving good news and to help us understand it and apply it to our lives and neighborhoods.

But the apostle Paul knew a church with outstanding preachers, and he was not im-

pressed. Paul wanted his readers to know that the most effective preacher is worthless without love. Without love the most articulate, winsome, engaging speaker is an obnoxious cymbal. What that first-century church needed most is what every church needs most: love.

What Paul says about love is like what the actress Helen Hayes said about charm: "If you have it, you don't need to have anything else; and if you don't have it, it doesn't much matter what else you have."

Lord Jesus, we stumble around looking for magic formulas that will set things right. Help us to receive and live out the love you have been offering us all along. Amen.

ANGEL TONGUES

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love
—1 Corinthians 13:1

Imagine a person able to speak every language on earth. Imagine what an effective engineer or salesperson or physician that person could be. The moment they landed at an airport, they could speak to anyone. They would be invaluable at a United Nations meeting or an international trade conference.

The apostle Paul imagines such a person, and then ups the ante: this person could also speak the languages of angels. We might suppose that a person who could communicate with angels might also be a brilliant orator, able to hold a crowd spellbound. Paul imagines such a person but says that if they lacked love, they would be “only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.”

Suppose on Christmas a dearly loved relative gave your eight-year-old twins a gong and a pair

of cymbals. You might survive Christmas day. Christmas cheer covers a multitude of bad gifts. But if your twins paraded into your bedroom the next morning banging the gong and crashing the cymbals, those gifts would strain your nervous system to the breaking point. All they would mean to you was a loud noise to be rid of.

That’s what the Bible says about remarkable gifts of language and eloquence and teaching—if separated from love, they are only noise.

Lord, you give us the gift of words. And language. And communication. Let us speak and communicate only in love. In the name of our loving Savior, Amen.

KNOW-IT-ALLS

If I have . . . all knowledge . . .

—1 Corinthians 13:2

In the old television sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond*, Marie Barone has two children. One is her idolized and beloved Ray; the other is her much-neglected Robert. As matriarch of her clan, Marie knows everything. Everything about being intrusive, manipulative, and over-nurturing. A self-proclaimed expert, she excels in every aspect of cooking, cleaning, and keeping a good home. To complicate matters, she lives across the street from Ray and his wife, Debra, and visits frequently to give Debra “helpful” advice.

The apostle Paul imagines a person who “can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge.” What a great help that would be for people puzzled by some parts of the Bible, or for people who struggle constantly with the big questions in life. No question

would be left unanswered. No mystery would go unexplained.

Then, says Paul, add to that a faith that could move mountains. Such a person could start churches and missionary movements. They could birth soup kitchens and housing shelters. They could end racism in their city. Yet, Paul says, without love, their stunning gifts would amount to nothing.

In a way, that is true with every ability or gift. You may accomplish many impressive things, but if you are loveless, you are empty, a big zero, nothing.

So get love.

Lord, we may have all the information or data we need, but help us to realize it's useless without your love. Amen.

GIVING AWAY EVERYTHING?

If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

—1 Corinthians 13:3

In the early church some extremely gifted Christians were trapped in slavery. Because their lives were not their own, they were restricted in what they could do and how they could serve. Sometimes, one of their fellow Christians, observing this travesty, would exchange themselves for their gifted friends. They would become a slave in their place so these gifted people would be free to serve the church more effectively. When that happened, the mark of the branding iron was put on the new slave's hand and his body was subjected to severe hardship.

We know it's impossible to love without giving, but Paul reminds us that it is possible to give without loving. Paul describes a person who gets completely involved in social concerns. He gives of his purse

and his person. And yet, without love, he gains nothing.

In a sense, that's what Paul is saying about our gifts and sacrifices. Apart from love our gifts accomplish nothing, make us nothing, and gain us nothing. The essential ingredient in following Jesus, in using our gifts, and in any sacrifice—what the church and our neighborhoods need most—is love.

All this raises an important question: If love is the essential ingredient in life, what do we mean by love? We need to learn what love is, and what love does.

Father, make us generous, far more than we can imagine. And make our generosity an act of your love. Amen.

A NEW KIND OF LOVE

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son . . .

—John 3:16

The ancient Greeks had many words for love. They had a word for the love of lovers, one for the love of friends, another for the love of country, and another for the love of beauty. Yet another word for love was seldom used: *agape*. In classical Greek *agape* is used only four times, and in each case it has an anemic translation: “goodwill.”

But Bible writers grabbed *agape* and poured gospel meaning into it. They used it to describe God’s love for us and for the kind of love God gives us for the people we know—and even for those we don’t. *Agape* refers to a set of our mind, a determination of our heart. *Agape* means to seek another person’s highest good, even if it demands putting that person’s good ahead of our own. This is the kind of love Jesus meant when he said, “Love your enemies and pray

for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44).

Philosopher Immanuel Kant read Jesus’ words and dismissed them as absurd. You can’t *command* love, he said. And in talking about the *feeling* kind of love, he was right. But it is possible to love your enemies in the sense of seeking their best interests.

We can determine to never return evil for evil or seek revenge (Romans 12:17, 19). We can even pray for those who cause us trouble. We can, by God’s grace, love like he does.

Father, thank you for the love you put in our hearts because of your Son, Jesus. May we love like you, because you first loved us. Amen.

PATIENCE

Love is patient

—1 Corinthians 13:4

A thousand things try our patience. You buy something that requires assembly, and the instructions are in French. A huge project is due, but your coworker is chatting in the break room. You spend days potty-training your four-year-old with no results. And then your neighbor informs you that her child mastered the task at age 2!

Specifically, love is patient with *people*. It's one thing to be patient with computers or fishing rods or an old Buick; it's another thing to be patient with your bigmouthed nephew or your crabby neighbor. Sometimes we become impatient with patience. We think of patience as the virtue of the elderly, the infirm, or those too weak to have other options.

But Christian love is patient because it is realistic. The Bible affirms what we already know;

there's something wrong with all of us. Sometimes people call that depravity. As darling as your three-year-old daughter can be, you don't need a theologian to tell you she's got an "evil twin" inside her as well. We all suffer from a curvature of the soul. All of us live with people who are imperfect. The world is filled with failures, and we soon discover that people will fail us. All of us fall short of being what we want to be.

We need God's grace to be patient with others. And we *can* be patient, because God is patient with us.

Patient Father, thank you for sticking with us, even when we fail you. Give us your strength to love in your patient way. Amen.

KINDNESS

Love is patient, love is kind. . . .

—1 Corinthians 13:4

Snow was falling on the beautiful seminary campus, about 30 miles north of Boston. As a retired person downsizing his possessions, the new 70-something interim president didn't own a snow shovel. He wondered how he would get his car out, especially in this New England blizzard. But a few minutes later he noticed a young student, outside with her shovel, digging out cars in the parking lot. Soon other students came to help her. When he got into his car, the president said, he felt as if the whole world looked different.

We appreciate a kindness when it is done to us. And by the power of God's spirit, we can show kindness to others. Jesus-followers can spend huge amounts of time arguing about musical taste, organizational strategies, and theological fine points. Each discussion has a

time and place. But most often following Jesus means doing simple things like being kind. What a different world it would be if we practiced kindness!

Kindness has a surprising kind of beauty. It's a sort of human masterpiece. Face to face with kindness, we might even find ourselves staring. Our heart might ache, in awe at such beauty. Over time, kindness is strong enough to soften the crustiest human heart, and it's muscular enough to grab hold of the biggest cynic.

When you see kindness—real kindness—you never forget. And you want to be kind yourself.

Father of all kindness, thank you for your kindness to us in Jesus. It is a most beautiful gift. Amen.

CONTROVERSIAL KINDNESS

Love is patient, love is kind.

—1 Corinthians 13:4

On the surface, kindness does not seem controversial, writes Princeton professor Tom Long. Kindness seems safe, even soft. Everybody promotes kindness. And yet we must be honest: kindness, properly lived, can lead to controversy, upsetting the status quo. We are wise to consider kindness carefully before blindly tolling its virtues.

Long describes a time when he arrived early for a worship service at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. It was a beautiful spring day. He hadn't eaten yet, so he visited a nearby deli to get a cup of coffee and a sweet roll. Walking across the street, he sat in a lovely park, ready to enjoy his breakfast. The lid wasn't off his coffee when a man who had obviously spent the night in the park walked up and asked, "Spare change?" Long had a

few coins and, reaching into his pocket, had that warm, self-congratulatory feeling of doing his "good deed for the day." But then behind this man he saw another homeless man, watching. Behind him were others, hungry and hoping. In his imagination, Long soon pictured all the homeless people of New York City surrounding him—and all he had was 30 cents in his hand.

You can't be kind in small things without connecting yourself to big things like homelessness, civil rights, economic justice, war and peace. Have you thought of kindness in big ways as well as small ways? Have you acted on it?

Father, you promise to make every wrong right. Help us be kind in small and big ways. Amen.

SIMPLE KINDNESS?

Love is patient, love is kind.

—1 Corinthians 13:4

A man went to the airport only to find his flight delayed, so he sat down near a restaurant. It was in the middle of the afternoon, and the restaurant was mostly empty. Only one person was there, a homeless and shabbily dressed man with his head resting on the tabletop. Suddenly a man who appeared to be the restaurant manager walked toward the table. The observer thought, "He's going to throw him out." But instead, as the manager walked past, he set a hot dog on the table. On the way back he set a cup of coffee next to the hot dog.

It was a simple kindness. But in effect the manager was saying, "In a few minutes I'm going to have to ask you to leave. But for a moment let us act like we are in heaven: 'Welcome to God's feast.'"

In a beautiful sermon on kindness Professor Tom Long suggests that biblical kindness is an act of civil disobedience. It's a refusal to treat people according to the customs and traditions of the status quo. It insists on seeing people and treating them in light of who they will be in God's future. It means treating people the way God in Jesus treats us: "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

Whom can you treat with kindness today?

Father, show us how to do simple acts and say simple words that lighten people's loads. In the name of Jesus, who carries all our burdens, Amen.

RADICAL KINDNESS

Love is patient, love is kind.

—1 Corinthians 13:4

Hanna Massad is a pastor of Gaza Baptist Church (near Israel). Hurrying through an alley in Gaza's violent Jabaliya refugee camp one chilly morning, he carried some groceries to a needy Muslim family. Twenty feet away, a young Palestinian carefully wrapped his semiautomatic weapon in a prayer rug, set it into his bicycle's milk-crate basket, and rode off.

Massad didn't flinch. Concealed weapons are not rare in Gaza. Love of neighbor is. Massad believes his mission is to feed Gaza's hungry and spread God's grace in a land of enmity.

Time magazine reports that after 34 centuries of civilization, the Gaza Strip remains a place of despair and dispute, without an acre of lasting peace. Terrorism, corruption, military rule, hunger, sickness, and mental illness stew in the same pot.

The word for "kindness" in the original Greek text is *chrestotes*. The apostle Paul used this word to describe God's incomprehensible kindness for people spiritually adrift (see Ephesians 2:7; Titus 3:4).

One scholar notes that in connection with human relationships *chrestotes* conveys the idea of being adaptable. Rather than requiring everyone to adapt to our needs and desires, through *chrestotes* we become adaptable to the needs of the people around us.

Do we exhibit that manner of kindness to those around us?

Father, help us to live out your love by showing your kindness to those around us. We know we can only do this through love. In your name we pray. Amen.

WITHOUT ENVY

Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

—Galatians 5:26

There's a legend that years ago the devil was crossing the Libyan desert. While traveling, he came upon a group of his demons trying to tempt a holy hermit. The man had withdrawn from society to live a pious, upright life in the desert. The demons were doing their best to get him to fall. Each tried their best temptation. One tempted him with seductions to satisfy his body. The holy man didn't flinch. Another whispered to him that all of this devotion to God was wasted, that no one would ever know about it. He was unmoved.

After the devil watched, he said to his demons, "When you're dealing with a really holy man, ordinary temptations just won't work." Then the devil went to the pious saint and whispered in his ear, "Did you know your best friend was just made bish-

op of Alexandria?" According to the legend, a look of foul envy crossed the holy man's face.

That's a legend—just a made-up story. But in it, we know, is a grain of truth. The British actor John Gielgud wrote in his autobiography, "When Sir Laurence Olivier played Hamlet in 1948 and critics raved, I wept."

So it has always been—and will be.

Unless love steps in.

Love does not envy because love rests in God's grace.

Father, by your grace, give us such a secure identity that we need not feel envious of another's success or abilities. Instead, let us celebrate the gifts you give to others. Amen.

WHAT ENVY DOES

A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.

—Proverbs 14:30

In the famous *Star Wars* movies, Master Yoda says, “Envy leads to jealousy, jealousy leads to hate, hate leads to anger, and anger leads to the dark side.”

The apostle Paul hadn’t watched *Star Wars*, but as a well schooled Pharisee, Paul memorized much of the Hebrew Scriptures. He knew the story of Cain and Abel. He knew the story of David and Saul. He could tell about Joseph and his envious brothers—and of King Ahab, who envied a farmer and stole his vineyard. Paul knew the proverb “A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.” Envy poisons from the inside.

In *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be*, Neal Plantinga helps us picture envy this way: “The envier gossips. He saves up bad news of others and passes it around like an appetizer at happy hour. The

envier grumbles. He murmurs. He complains that all the wrong people are getting ahead. Spite, bitterness, ‘discord which undoes all friendship,’ accusation, malignity—all these things flow from envy and together turn friendship and good fellowship into a rancorous shambles.”

The envy of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden corrupted paradise. “Envy,” says the sage, “rots the bones.”

What do you think of God’s love for ragged sinners? True love gives up envy and exchanges it for grace.

Father, thank you for your generous love to us. Transform our stingy envy into your joyful grace. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

TRUE LOVE

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

—John 13:34-35

In 1929 Broadway tapped its toe to Cole Porter's catchy new song: "What Is This Thing Called Love?" Soon it became a jazz standard, later to be sung by Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, and many others. More recently it was sung by Wynton Marsalis and Gwyneth Paltrow. And why not? It's catchy.

Maybe this song lasts because it asks a question any person would ask: "What is this thing called love?" Though the focus of this song is romantic love, we can think of this question asking about love in general, and people have all kinds of ideas about that.

Everyone seems to have a definition. A freshman says, "I love chemistry, but not calculus." A child says, "I love my cat." A woman in her twenties says, "I love my family." A middle-aged grocer says, "I love steak." A

pastor says, "I love the church." An old hymn sings, "My Jesus, I love thee."

Jesus said the greatest commands are to love God and people (Matthew 22:37-40). He wants the *agape* love of God to characterize all his followers. All through the New Testament we are called and inspired and commanded to this selfless, unconditional kind of love. In Galatians 5:22 Paul calls it "the fruit of the Spirit"—evidence of God's Spirit working in us.

So what is love? Jesus shows us on the cross.

Father, you loved the world so much that you gave your only Son, that whoever believes in him can have eternal life. Thank you! Amen.

NO BOASTING, NO VAUNTING

Love . . . does not boast. . . .

—1 Corinthians 13:4

The old King James Version of the Bible, written in the beautiful language of the 1600s, uses these words in 1 Corinthians 13:4: “Charity vaunteth not itself.” To vaunt is to verbalize your own prowess, to express your vanity. It can include showing off after besting an opponent, and smirking as you walk by a defeated rival.

We boast for a lot of reasons. We want to be affirmed, and affirmation can be a good thing. But when that becomes our key motivator, we will do anything to gain the approval of others—that is, we’ll do anything except to show love.

A teenage boy takes a girl on a date. All night long he talks about himself. As he walks her to the door to say goodnight, he realizes he’s been talking about himself all evening. So he says, “I apologize. I’ve been talking

about myself all night. Why don’t you talk about me for a while?”

The Greek word for “boast” or “vaunt” comes from a root meaning “windbag.” When we boast, we spew a kind of foul hot air that comes from inner conceit.

Love is not a windbag. It doesn’t demand that its accomplishments be noticed. It doesn’t need to dominate a conversation. It can be happy if another shines while it stands quietly on the sidelines.

Father in heaven, let us rest in your accomplishments: in creation, on the cross, and at the resurrection. Help us to boast only in what you have done for us. In the name of our humble Savior we pray. Amen.

HUMILITY

Love . . . is not proud. . . .

—1 Corinthians 13:4

The ancient church at Corinth was full of spiritual showoffs. Braggarts constantly vied for public attention. As a result, worship services in that congregation were chaotic, with everybody talking at the same time like prima donnas starving for publicity. Paul gives those attention seekers a remedy in 1 Corinthians 14.

Veteran Christians today may be too sophisticated for the trash talking that happens at sports events, but they can be masters of tilting a conversation to accent their own strengths.

William Carey was a missionary pioneer. An ordinary working-class person, he had a vision of telling people all over the world about Jesus. A natural linguist, he went to India and translated the Bible into 34 different languages. While there, he lived with the British, who at that time governed India. Many Brits

in India were nobility or military officers who had gone to the best schools; Carey had not.

One day at a formal dinner another man was talking to Carey and said in a voice just a little too loud, "Mr. Carey, I understand, sir, that you were a *shoemaker*." It was a carefully placed put-down in a world of British aristocrats. Carey responded, "No. I don't know where you heard that. It isn't true. I was a *cobbler*. I repaired shoes, but I didn't have enough skill to make them."

Love is not proud or puffed up.

Lord, so often we talk big because we feel small. We growl like a giant because we feel like a dwarf. Rescue us in Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

LOVE HAS GOOD MANNERS

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others. . . .

—1 Corinthians 13:4-5

In the blockbuster movie *Shrek*, Mike Myers is the voice of an ogre. He's grumpy and messy and "snotty." He's crude. But as the movie goes on, we meet Lord Farquaad, a finely cultured man brought up with etiquette. And as we watch this self-centered snob, we discover who really needs a lesson in manners.

Might it also be that we who follow Jesus could use a seminar in manners? During the 17th century, Puritans and Quakers got into heated debates. The great Puritan preacher Richard Baxter wrote a pamphlet in which he lumped Quakers with "drunks, swearers, whore-mongers . . . sensual wretches" and other "miserable creatures." Quaker leader James Naylor then declared that he was "compelled by the Spirit of Jesus" to respond, and he characterized his Puritan opponent as a serpent,

a liar, a "child of the devil," a "cursed hypocrite," and a "dumb dog."

A wise Christian calls such attitudes a "crusading mentality." Today such venom is more often seen between Christians and people of other faiths or opinions. People find points of disagreement, and immediately they start a crusade to "fix" them.

It's good to be passionate, but Jesus tells us it's more valuable to love. And love does not dishonor people—even those with whom we disagree.

Father, more than etiquette, we need your manners. Help us produce fruit of the Spirit and honor everyone. Amen.

SELF-SEEKING—OR NOT

Love . . . is not self-seeking.

—1 Corinthians 13:4-5

A pastor described a young couple that had recently been attending his church. As new attendees, they were delighted. They found the church warm and hospitable. They were welcomed with open arms. Long-time members gave them attention and were interested in their opinions. But many months later, after they became members of the church, this couple started to complain. They felt that people were no longer spending enough time with them. The church leaders, they decided, were only concerned with new visitors. No one focused on them anymore.

When a church leader heard about this, he visited with them and said, "When you first came here, you needed love and acceptance. Now you need to help the church give other people that love and acceptance."

The couple needed to make spiritual progress. They needed to learn that love is not self-seeking.

Each of us is tempted to set up our own ego as an idol for others to dance around. Unconsciously we put ourselves on stage and ask others to applaud. We praise so that we will get praise in return. We love to get love in return. We serve to be served in return. And we believe our deep needs excuse our behavior.

Love enables us to see beyond ourselves. It takes the attention off us and seeks the good of our neighbors.

Lord, rescue us. We are desperate, stuffed with ourselves. Unstuff us by your grace, and fill us with Jesus' love. Amen.

NO RECORD KEEPING

Love . . . keeps no record of wrongs.

—1 Corinthians 13:4-5

We often have to make a choice either to extend forgiveness to someone, or to hang on to and nurse a grievance. A friend we trust betrays us. A college roommate criticizes us publicly. A business colleague swindles us. Someone posts something on social media that isn't true, but it goes viral and stains our reputation.

When wronged, we want justice. We want the perpetrator to feel our hurt, to know the pain they have caused. We want revenge.

Paul imagines an accountant recording items in a ledger, but he says love doesn't do that. It doesn't record wrongs done against us.

Have you ever listened to a person describe something done against them decades ago? They remember every ugly detail.

Some of us have no statute of limitations. We review our ledger regularly, and we spoil our lives.

More than one person in history never forgot a slight against him. He might have appeared to bury the hatchet, but each time he marked the spot.

A pastor said, "Most of what I talk about with people in my church is learning to forgive." Many of us have a bitterness we polish like a priceless antique. We cling to it like a child clutching a favorite, filthy rag of a blanket.

Love lets go.

Father, heal our old wounds. Give us the grace of forgiveness. End our record keeping. Through Jesus, who paid for all our wrongs, Amen.

EVIL DELIGHT

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

—1 Corinthians 13:6-7

At first this statement may seem unnecessary: "Love does not delight in evil." Any person with a shred of decency hates evil and its effects. Who giggles at someone's heart attack or laughs at starving children or refugees of war? But every now and then we discover a nasty truth about ourselves: we often delight when others stumble.

We struggle to get C's. And then on one test we get a B and the class whiz gets the first C of her life. It's hard not to smile.

Our business turns sour. Creditors knock on our doors. All the while our friends do fine. But then their finances hit a snag. We find ourselves feeling happier because they suffer too.

Or our children make some bad decisions and get into trouble with the law. Meanwhile, our neighbor's son becomes a re-

spected leader in the community. But then he makes a huge mistake that goes public. Who's happy now?

Smiling at others' troubles can make us look better. If we can pull someone else down, we stand taller. Like when a deacon of the church summed up the financial report: "Things did not go well in the past year, and the membership dropped, but at least we can say, 'Thank God that the church down the street did even worse!'"

The Bible speaks against such delight because it hurts people. "Love does not delight in evil."

Father, forgive us when we delight in the tragedies of others. Heal our brokenness so that we can love as you do. Amen.

JOY IN THE TRUTH

Love . . . rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. —1 Corinthians 13:6-7

Conversation often flows freely when gossip worms its way in. But try shifting a negative conversation toward delight in someone's goodness, and the lively banter will often end with a thud. You've stopped the fun. But that's fun bent on savoring rumors, speculating on half-truths, and spreading lies.

Instead, why not celebrate people's good points and accomplishments? Not to set them up as so much better or greater than others. But it can be good to build people up, to celebrate the true and noble and right and admirable things they have done. Everyone needs praiseworthy examples to look up to.

Think of the great discoveries of science and explorations of nature that have helped us understand the world God has given us—and how best to live in it. Think of the good ways people

can live together, grounded in the virtues of honesty, truth, courage, hard work, sacrifice, and making excellent use of our talents and gifts—all to the glory of God.

When you love people, you delight in their good. You speak well of them. And you show compassion and forgiveness if something has gone wrong in their lives. You speak carefully to protect and defend the truth and the ones you love. You don't gloss over wrongdoing, but you promote justice and "right-doing"—all based on truth that yields joy-filled living.

Keep us, Lord, from twisting the truth and cutting others down. May we all grow up together in you. In Jesus, Amen.

PROTECTION

Love . . . always protects

—1 Corinthians 13:6-7

Love “protects.” Some older translations say it “bears all things.” The reason for the two options is that the Greek word *stego* in the original text can be translated either way.

The word was used to describe a ship sailing in the midst of a storm. Pounded by wind and waves, it might look like the ship would go under. But it was able to withstand the onslaught of the storm.

The word was used for a house that had a good roof. When heavy rains came, the roof did not leak, but bore the rain.

The word was also used for a group of soldiers trapped in a city under siege. The enemy might do all they could to get them to surrender, but the soldiers would not give in. They “bore up” under the attack.

That’s true of love too. When you read 1 and 2 Corinthians, you can see this was a church dear to Paul’s heart. In many ways this church caused him heartache and pain. And yet Paul bore with them. The storms came, the rains fell, the enemy attacked, but, in God’s strength, Paul did not give in.

It’s incredible what people go through, what they will bear up under when they love someone. Love bears all things. Love protects. Love surrounds like a force field that nothing can penetrate.

Love can do this because it has God’s strength. And God never quits or gives up.

Jesus, thank you for never giving up, for never quitting on us—or on the people we love. Thank you for bearing the cross for our sake. Amen.

LOVE TRUSTS

Love . . . always trusts. . . .

—1 Corinthians 13:6-7

In the American South they have a proverb: “If you call a dog a bad name, he’ll live up to it.” It’s probably true that if you call a dog a good name, he’ll live up to that too.

I think this proverb can also be applied to people. It’s amazing that with people you often get what you expect.

During an experiment several years ago all the brown-eyed students in a class were asked to sit in the front and all the blue-eyed students were asked to sit in the back. The teacher told the brown-eyed ones, “Brown-eyed children are more intelligent than blue-eyed.” The teacher kept this up for a week and found that the brown-eyed students did better in their homework. They got better grades. They were better behaved in class. The blue-eyed kids began to decline.

The following week the teacher came to class and said, “I’ve made a terrible mistake. The research shows it was the blue-eyed kids that are better.” She moved them to the front of the class, telling them they were more intelligent, and soon their scores soared.

Thankfully such experiments are no longer allowed. But they remind us that love is willing to trust, to give people the benefit of the doubt.

Jesus is willing to call us friends, trusting us to “go and bear . . . fruit that will last,” showing his love everywhere. Are we with him?

Lord, thank you for loving us even when we disappoint people, ourselves, and you. Make us ever new, in your name. Amen.

LOVE HOPES

Love . . . always hopes. . . .

—1 Corinthians 13:6-7

A young man grows up as the terror of his neighborhood. He steals and lies. People can't stand him. In his teens he starts to deal drugs. People at school write him off. The police discover he's a skilled criminal and shut him up in a penitentiary.

But when a reporter interviews his mother, she says, "Chuck was always such a good boy." She even adds wistfully, "If the governor released him today, he'd be a help in the neighborhood tomorrow." It's sweet for the mother to think well of her son. But if that reporter interviewed Chuck's fellow inmates, they'd say his mom was delusional, that Chuck doesn't have a chance at being good.

In the Bible hope is always grounded in the strength and power and grace of God. That can make a difference, even in the life of someone like Chuck.

The city of Corinth was a moral slime pit. To call a man a Corinthian was to call him a moral sewer dweller. Their parties were orgies to the nth degree. But one day the apostle Paul went into Corinth and preached "Christ crucified" (1 Corinthians 1:23). Many laughed and went back to their revelry. But others listened and believed.

We are sometimes tempted to give up on people. But God does not. Not even on us. No matter what we've done—or left undone. Love always hopes for its neighbor, its coworker, its child, even for itself. It hopes because it is of God.

Father, I'm not where I want to be, but by your grace give me hope that I can reflect the love of your Son, Jesus. Amen.

LOVE LASTS

Love never fails.

—1 Corinthians 13:8

The word for “fails” (*piptei*) in our verse for today was used to describe a flower that was fading, or a tree that had fallen in the forest, or a joint that had come loose or had broken. So when Paul used this word here, he was saying, “Love never fades, it never falls, and it never gets pushed out of place.” Love endures.

An outstanding scholar said, “What discourages me most about all that we do is that I know a hundred years from now most of our study is going to be obsolete.” He is correct. And it’s not just true for academics; it’s also true for car mechanics and computer gurus.

Who would want to research medical solutions from a 1930s encyclopedia, use an air conditioner built in the 1940s, or pack a cell phone from the 1990s? Even a history textbook from twenty years ago is out-

dated. National boundaries get redrawn. Interpretations change like clothing styles and then disappear.

Don’t misunderstand. Paul is not saying spiritual gifts and knowledge are worthless. But Paul is saying that such things are not to be emphasized first in our lives. While these gifts are good things, they will pass away.

And since we are made for eternity, we should major in love.

Lord Jesus, help us to focus, as you have taught us, on love. As you have loved us, so let us love one another, so that everyone will know we are your disciples. Amen.

CHILDLIKE LOVE

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child.
—1 Corinthians 13:11

When I was a pastor in Minnesota, our church had a preschool in its facility. One day the preschoolers paraded past my office door. We smiled and waved to each other. They were on their way to the church kitchen to bake gingerbread men. After returning to their classroom, a worried preschooler asked about me, “After those gingerbread men are done baking and start walking into his office, will he eat them?” Actually he asked, “Will Mrs. Kevin eat them?” He figured that since his teachers were Mrs. Van De Riet and Mrs. Larsen, I must be Mrs. Kevin.

We laugh at the logic of children. We think it’s cute the way preschoolers think. They have learned a lot, but there is still so much to learn.

But our “adult” knowledge too is partial and incomplete. We know some things, but we have

a lot of questions. We often say that when we get to heaven there are things we will ask Jesus, or Paul, or some other biblical character. But it’s quite possible that when we get to heaven we will realize that on earth we didn’t even know the right questions to ask. Issues that tear denominations apart here on earth might in heaven be totally unimportant. We may find that much of our great earthly knowledge is unimportant compared to the “surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus [our] Lord” (Philippians 3:8).

Father, we know only in part. As we wait until the day when we will see you face to face, give us humble, gospel grace to love one another. Amen.

LOVE IN A MIRROR

Now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face.
—1 Corinthians 13:12

The city of Corinth was known for the mirrors it made. They were distributed throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. They weren't the same as mirrors we have today—made of glass with a silver backing. Corinthian mirrors were highly polished metal. Even the best were blurry. You could see yourself, but it was like looking into a car's shiny hubcap or bumper. And the cheaper models gave a hazy reflection at best.

That's a picture, says the apostle Paul, of our current level of knowledge and understanding. We can see the broad outline of things. But there's a lot we don't see; there are many things we don't understand. What we know about God, about ourselves, and our world is limited. Our knowledge is incomplete. So anyone who takes pride in

having great knowledge is a fool.

In the era of unclear mirrors other people knew better than you did how you actually looked. They could see you face to face. But God's Word promises that one day we shall see things as they really are. Even better, we will see God. Clearly. Face to face. It won't be like looking into a hubcap or through a haze. Meeting God will take our breath away—and our pride.

Until then, wise and helpful people major in love. Because love lasts forever.

One glorious day, Father, we will see you face to face. We will be filled with a wonder that is everlasting. We long for that day. Amen.

LOVE REMAINS

Now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.
—1 Corinthians 13:13

It's hard to know exactly what Paul means when he says love is greater than hope and faith. He just makes the statement and leaves it to us to think it through. It may be that love, in comparison to faith and hope, describes the very heart of God.

God does not need to exercise faith. And he does not need to hope because he already knows the future. But the Bible says, "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16).

Love is God's nature. So when a person becomes a Jesus follower, a Christian, they not only receive God's love; they also share in his divine nature. To the church at Rome Paul wrote, "God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us" (Romans 5:5). So whenever you and I love another person, we are displaying the very character of God.

We are never more like God than when we love one of his creatures. Because love alone is of God, it is the greatest of all virtues.

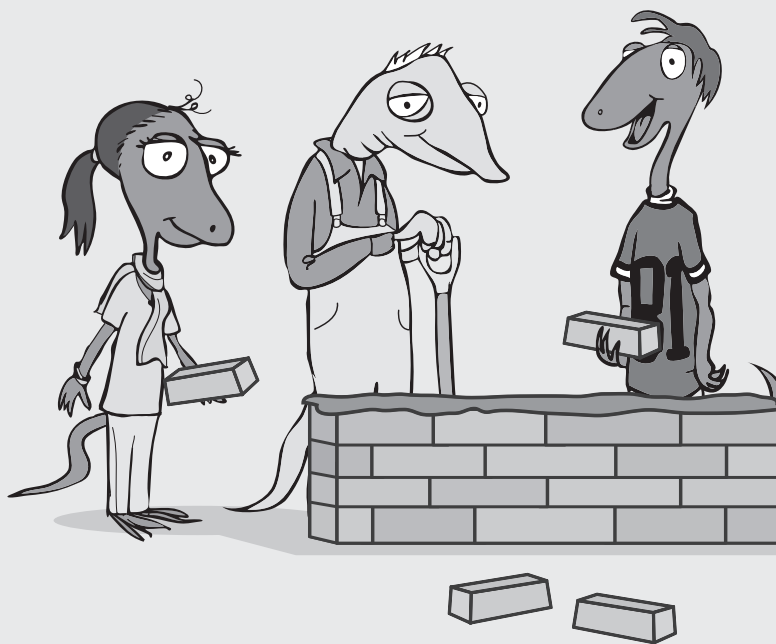
We only go around once in life, and that go-around is pretty short. So we need to take some advice: we must devote ourselves to what is eternal. Whatever our particular gifts are, whatever part of his kingdom God is calling us to serve in, the best thing we can do to show our love and gratitude for Jesus is to minister to other people in love.

Father, fill us with your Spirit. Give us love, which binds all other virtues "together in perfect unity" (Colossians 3:14). In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

NOTES

NOTES

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