

The background of the cover is a vibrant photograph of a field of white daisies with yellow centers. The flowers are in various stages of bloom, some in sharp focus in the foreground and others blurred in the background. The sky above is a deep, clear blue, with a single, bright white lightning bolt striking down from the upper right corner. The overall mood is one of natural beauty and divine power.

Jul/Aug 2013

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew

**WEATHER, NATURE,  
AND GOD**

**ALSO: SABBATH PRACTICES**

Friends:

Everyone talks about the weather. Maybe it's just idle chitchat, making small talk with neighbors or strangers. Maybe it's quite important to your everyday work and business—farming and transportation, for instance, rely heavily on weather conditions. Maybe it's about the big picture of long-term climate change and all kinds of global, social, political, and economic implications. In any case, the weather affects everyone.



In August, Sergei Sosedkin reminds us that all our weather remains in God's hands. Even with our 21st-century self-sufficiency, a strong thunderstorm—not to mention an earthquake or hurricane—reminds us of how small we truly are compared to our Creator.

But first, in July, Shawn Brix blesses us with an exploration of Sabbath rest. He reminds us that we are both called and blessed to find rest in the presence of the God who loves us. What a gift to spend time with our Savior every day!

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

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven Koster". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

—Steven Koster

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**“Sabbath Practices”**  
**Shawn Brix**



**“Weather, Nature,  
and God”**  
**Sergei Sosedkin**

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**re** FRAME MEDIA

# this issue

## Sabbath Practices—July 2013

**Shawn Brix**

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” (Exodus 20:8). Sabbath is a gift God graciously gives us! For many years God’s people have acknowledged the Sabbath and the Lord’s Day as a day set apart for God. And from it a number of practices have grown to mark believers’ everyday lives. This month we’ll explore many of those practices, such as pausing, remembering, rejoicing, silence, and solitude. May these give you a taste of Sabbath rest!

*Shawn Brix and his wife have three adult children. He has served three Ontario (Canada) churches and is now pastor at Living Hope Christian Reformed Church in Peterborough, Ontario. He loves to hike and canoe, during which he often engages in Sabbath practices, or disciplines.*

## Weather, Nature, and God—August 2013

**Sergei Sosedkin**

Every culture on earth is affected by the weather it has to deal with. And today in our global economy, natural disaster can affect more people than ever before—drought, flooding, earthquake, tsunami, tornado, blizzard, hurricane, and more. In these devotions Rev. Sosedkin draws on Bible passages as well as stories from his life and ministry to reflect on weather, nature, and God’s power, especially God’s saving power and mercy for us in Christ.

*Sergei Sosedkin is the Russian outreach leader for Back to God Ministries International. He divides his time between ministry in the United States and in his native Russia, supervising the production of evangelism and discipleship media resources (see [www.BackToGod.net/global-ministries-russian/](http://www.BackToGod.net/global-ministries-russian/)).*

**BE STILL**

*“Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.”* —Psalm 46:10

We tend to think of being “busy” as something positive—maybe even a compliment—especially when we consider some of its opposites, like being “idle” or “lazy.” But we shouldn’t assume that “busyness” is a Christian virtue. Have you ever thought that busyness could be a sign of Christian betrayal rather than commitment?

We should be thankful that many believers are busy for the Lord. Giving ourselves in service to God’s kingdom is an essential part of the believer’s life. But mere busyness does not equal faithfulness in the Christian life.

In a time of great social upheaval and national crisis, God urged his people to simply “be still” and know that he was God. Twice in Psalm 46, God’s people heard the assurance that the Lord Almighty was

with them. He would be their comfort and mighty fortress. The key to experiencing that assurance, though, would be to approach God with a stilled heart and quiet trust.

When we withdraw from our busy lives to spend time with God, we find ourselves enjoying the reality of his presence. While we are not called by God to be lazy or idle, neither are we called to a life of non-stop activity and service. God’s invitation to “be still” unlocks for us the joy of knowing him.

Lord Almighty, we rejoice that you are with us. Teach us to be still so that increasingly we can experience your presence in our lives through your Holy Spirit within. Amen.

## DRIVEN TO DISTRACTION

*“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one.”*  
—Luke 10:41-42

You have to love Martha, don't you? She was much like us—distracted by many things!

Martha had many mouths to feed, and she wanted to be the best possible host to her guests. No wonder she was “dragged all around.” That's what the word for “distracted” literally means. Because of her insistence that everything needed to be just right, she was pulled in every direction till she was nearly coming apart at the seams! Finally, in desperation, she asked Jesus to tell Mary to pitch in: “Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”

What made Martha so driven? Did she somehow need to feel important? Was she driven by a desire to live up to the expectations of others? Or was she sim-

ply unwilling to come to terms with her own limitations?

In Jesus' response we hear his tenderness and care for her: “Martha, Martha . . . you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one.” Yet we also hear a gentle rebuke. Martha had chosen what was second best. Mary, on the other hand, had chosen well. She had put Jesus in first place, and as a result, she was able to set aside busyness for a while to soak up the joy of being with her Lord.

Lord Jesus, there is so much to do! We find it hard to simply “stop” to listen and learn from you. Teach us how to gather at your feet, ready to honor you and take your words into our hearts. Amen.

**“BEING” VERSUS “DOING”**

*Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair.*

—John 12:3

In yesterday's reading (Luke 10:38-42) Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet, soaking up his every word. That's often where she could be found. In John 11, for example, Mary fell at Jesus' feet to express her grief over the death of her brother. And in today's reading we see Mary again at the Lord's feet.

At a dinner hosted in Jesus' honor, Mary suddenly got down on the floor. In an act of worship and lavish devotion to Jesus, she began pouring expensive perfume on his feet. She then proceeded to wipe his feet dry with her hair. And as she did so, the smell of a beautiful fragrance filled the room.

Although Mary was often at Jesus' feet, we shouldn't assume she was never interested in working hard or serving others. It's just that she seemed to understand that her “doing”

needed to flow out of her “being.” If her work was going to be effective, she needed first to simply soak up time with Jesus.

You and I are not first and foremost human “doings”—we are human “beings”!

Mary seemed to understand that. And as a result, Jesus praised her for choosing what was truly needed (Luke 10:42).

Do we sit at Jesus' feet?

Thank you, God, for showing us that Mary often chose to be at the feet of Jesus. Remind us that our value is to be found not in what we do, but simply in who we are in Christ, our Savior. Amen.

## BEARING FRUIT

*"If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."*  
—John 15:5

Our "doing" for Jesus has to flow out of our "being" with Jesus.

Jesus said it this way: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

A branch, apart from the vine from which it draws life and nourishment, is unable to bear fruit. In fact, a branch that is disconnected from the vine is really no more than kindling for a fire.

Imagine if all your busyness, in the end, amounted to nothing. Imagine if the activities and work you're involved in failed to add up to any lasting value. Basically Jesus said, "Unless you're living in me, and I am living in you, all your running and chasing and striving will amount to nothing. Only what flows out of a dynamic, living

relationship with me will bear fruit that lasts."

Our own strength is not enough. We need to draw our strength from the vine if we want our lives to bear fruit for God's kingdom.

The most important part of the Christian life is the part that only God sees. We find God's deepest blessing when we spend time at the feet of the One who knows and loves us best.

O God, forgive us for the times we try to live out of our own strength. We need to be deeply connected to you so that your life can flow through us to others! Amen.

## GOD'S GIFT OF SABBATH

*"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. . . . The seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God." —Exodus 20:8, 10*

God's commands are not intended to box us in or limit us. They are intended to free us! God's commandments are gifts to us. As we willingly submit to them, we discover the path of life and blessing!

One of the gifts God gives is the gift of Sabbath. As we open this gift, we begin to experience the joy of simply "being" and are freed from the burden of relentless "doing." Through God's good gift of Sabbath, we're invited to draw our life and nourishment from his vine into our branches (John 15:5).

Over the remainder of this month, we're going to unwrap this wonderful gift. As we do, we're going to discover that Sabbath is about a lifestyle, a rhythm, a way of "doing life" that feeds our soul and develops our spirit. Some Christians have grown up thinking that

Sabbath is little more than a day each week when they aren't allowed to ride a bike or visit a store. But Sabbath, as God designed it, is to help us grow into the fullness he intends for us.

Sabbath is the pattern Jesus lived—a rhythm of active service and quiet retreat, of dynamic ministry energized by times of intentional withdrawal to be with God. If Jesus needed time to be alone with his Father, how much more is that true for us!

Thank you, Father, for your tender commandments, and in particular, for the gift of Sabbath. Help us rediscover the true joy and freedom of this wonderful gift! In Jesus' name, Amen.

## THE FIRST SABBATH KEEPER

*God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.*

—Genesis 2:3

When we hear the word “Sabbath,” many of us think of the Jews—as if the concept of Sabbath began with them. When others of us hear the term, we might think of Protestant Reformers—as if the idea of Sabbath somehow started in the 16th century.

But the origin of the Sabbath is with God, the very first Sabbath keeper.

Today’s reading says that on the seventh day God “rested from all the work of creating that he had done.” The first six days of creation were filled with a flurry of activity. As God released his creative energy, planets were born, stars were set in place, and the earth began teeming with life. But on the seventh day, the Creator rested.

It was *God* who first started the rhythm of six days of work fol-

lowed by one day of rest. He is the one who established the pattern in the very beginning.

And because we have been made in his image (Genesis 1:27), that pattern is built into the very fabric of who we are.

Our lives, in order to reflect the life of the Creator, are to follow that same “six-and-one” pattern of work and rest.

Father in heaven, on the seventh day of creation you looked out over all that you had made and declared it good! May we too follow the pattern of work and rest that you began. Amen.

## KEEPING TEMPO

*In the seventh year the land is to have a year of sabbath rest, a sabbath to the LORD.*  
—Leviticus 25:4

In Old Testament Israel, even the land was to fit the six-and-one Sabbath pattern that God established when he created the world. In today's reading, God tells Moses that when the Israelites entered the land the Lord was giving them, the people were to see that the land had a regular time of rest—"a sabbath to the LORD."

Six-and-one is the rhythm of God's creation. It's our tempo too. The pattern of six days of work followed by one day of pausing from work is written into the very core of our being. When we live by that rhythm, we're living in step with our created nature.

Keeping Sabbath has nothing to do with forcing a legalistic duty on our lives. Keeping in step with God's rhythm in us doesn't add a *burden* to us; it *frees* us to live by the pattern that God

himself modeled. That suits us best as creatures made in his image.

When a wrench is used as a hammer, the work doesn't go well. The wrench glances off the head of the nail, and it lacks the necessary weight to drive the nail properly. But when a wrench is used for the work it was *designed* to do—to tighten or loosen nuts and bolts—that's when a wrench is *free*.

We keep Sabbath to stay in synch with the way we were designed and to enjoy the freedom of full life with God.

Dear God, thank you for the gift of life. Help me to live in step with how you have created me; allow the pattern of my life to fit with the person you made me to be. Amen.

## PAUSING

*"The seventh day is a day of sabbath rest . . . You are not to do any work; wherever you live, it is a sabbath to the LORD."*

—Leviticus 23:3

The practice of pausing from work is key to understanding the biblical idea of Sabbath. There are other practices crucial to the celebration of Sabbath that we'll explore later this month. But the discipline of pausing is perhaps the most central to Sabbath-keeping.

The word "Sabbath" comes from the Hebrew word *shabbat*, which at its root means "to cease." To live in keeping with Sabbath, we must cease for a time, or pause, from our work.

For many people around the world, weekdays are for working at our jobs or careers, while weekends are for work around the home. The idea of Sabbath, though, isn't to substitute one form of work for another. Sabbath invites us to truly rest from all our labors.

Of course, one person's work may be another person's play. Tinkering on an engine may be frustrating for one person, but sheer joy for another! Or gardening may be refreshing for some, but for others it may be a chore. So it's not helpful to try to come up with a list for everyone to define what is work and what is not.

Still, when we make time to pause from whatever feels like work for us, and instead we explore our dreams and engage in good things that fill us with delight, our body, mind, and spirit are refreshed!

God in heaven, thank you for inviting us to pause from our work to enjoy the delights you have placed in our lives. Help us to bask in the Sabbath! Amen.

## SHARPENING OUR AXE

*Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

—Colossians 3:17

God's invitation to pause from work doesn't mean work is bad. Work is not to be seen strictly as a duty but, rather, as one of our main ways to serve God. When we do all our work as working for the Lord Jesus, then God is worshiped and receives the glory! In fact, one of the reasons God calls us to keep Sabbath is so that we will be effective in our work the other six days of the week!

There was once a man who challenged another to an all-day wood chopping contest. The challenger worked hard all day, barely taking a break. The other man, however, had a leisurely lunch and took several breaks to rest.

As evening fell, the first man was angered by the results. "Every time I checked," he said, "you were taking a rest, and yet

you ended up chopping more wood than I did."

"But you didn't notice," said the winner, "that I was sharpening my axe each time I sat down."

God calls us to stop working once a week so that we can "sharpen our axe." He calls us to Sabbath so that we can be of greater service and of greater benefit in all our work—in our jobs and at home and with our church and family.

Thank you, O God, for the gift of work. Help me to learn how to regularly pause so that I am better equipped to serve you, bringing you glory in all my labors. Amen.

## CHOSEN IN LOVE

*The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples.*  
—Deuteronomy 7:7

Throughout the Old Testament, God had to remind Israel that he didn't choose them because they were great or strong. In fact, they were the very least among the world's peoples. They were chosen simply because of God's love.

Our world is bent on accomplishment, obtaining, and possessing. Pausing regularly from our work helps to remind us that our worth is not found in our productivity. Keeping Sabbath teaches us that our ultimate worth is not found in what we can amass or accomplish in life.

Christians don't belong to Jesus because they outperformed others or because they got an "A" in discipleship. If you're a believer, you know you belong to Jesus because God loves you so much that he sent his Son, Jesus, to die for you, paying the

price of your sin. You don't belong to Jesus because he loves what you have *accomplished* or achieved; you belong to him because of God's loving grace.

There is no greater reminder of this remarkable truth than receiving God's invitation to Sabbath rest. God invites us to pause from work because we too easily begin to equate our worth with what we've done. We can afford to pause because we no longer have to prove ourselves. We're loved!

Dear God, thank you that we don't need to earn our way into your kingdom. You welcome us simply on account of Jesus' death and resurrection for our sake. Thank you that he has completed all the work necessary! Amen.

## REMEMBERING

*Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.*  
—Deuteronomy 5:15

Anniversaries are for looking back and remembering. On the special day of their wedding anniversary, a married couple may pull out their photo albums and reminisce about their years together. Anniversaries are an opportunity for a husband and wife to take stock of their relationship, celebrate one another, and give thanks to God for his goodness and faithfulness through the years.

In much the same way, God gives us the gift of Sabbath for “remembering.” That’s what God made clear to his people in today’s Bible reading; “Observe the Sabbath day.” How? Remember! “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.”

Like an anniversary, Sabbath for Israel was to be a time for

looking back and remembering. So, in addition to pausing, or resting, Sabbath gives us a regular opportunity to look back and be reminded of all the ways God has been at work in our lives, blessing us, leading us, and providing for us.

The practice of a regular Sabbath helps us to be intentional about telling the stories of all God has done for us in Jesus, and to remember how valuable our relationship with the Father is through him.

Help me, O God, to regularly remember and celebrate all that you have done for me through your Son, Jesus. Thank you for his life, death, and resurrection! Amen.

## FORGETTING

*They forgot what he had done, the wonders he had shown them.*  
—Psalm 78:11

It's remarkable how many times God's people were blamed with "forgetting" the Lord and all he had done for them. Deuteronomy 32:18 declares, "You forgot the God who gave you birth." And Judges 3:7 proclaims a refrain that continues throughout their history: "The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD; they forgot the LORD their God." As our reading today puts it, "They forgot what he had done, the wonders he had shown them." God's people could be so forgetful!

God intends, however, that we use the gift of Sabbath to remember him, taking the opportunity to tell of his goodness and recount his faithfulness. Sabbath is a time for celebrating the freedom he has won for us in Jesus!

Decay theory suggests that a memory trace is created in our

brains with each new piece of information or each new experience we take in. These memory traces, though, begin almost immediately to fade and disappear. If they're not retrieved and rehearsed, eventually they're lost. In short, if we don't use it, we'll lose it!

Sabbath gives us time and space to simply sit and reflect. It provides us the opportunity to muse over and ponder God's wonderful love for us in Jesus and to give him thanks!

Gracious God in heaven, it's so easy for us to lose sight of the grace and love you've shown us in Jesus. Help us to develop the Sabbath discipline of "remembering." In Jesus' name, Amen.

## DEEPENING THE MEMORY TRACES

*Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.*  
—Luke 2:19

Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a Sabbath keeper! She made room and took time to treasure all the things that had happened in connection with Jesus' birth and to ponder them "in her heart." Essentially, Mary was deepening the memory traces of the miracle God had worked in her and how his grace had so wonderfully touched her life (see Luke 1:26-55).

When we cram our days and weeks so full that one day simply bleeds into the next and one week becomes another without ever stopping to pause, we lose the opportunity to reflect on and remember who God is and how he has been at work in our life.

I often find it hard to sit for even just ten minutes. I want to jump up and *do* something! But *doing* can wear us out. Doing without pausing to remember

God can dull our faith and dry up our spiritual vitality. Every spiritual "giant" from every century has said the same thing: you can't develop a deep, abiding, genuine relationship with God through Jesus when you're always in a hurry.

God calls us to get off the treadmill and pause. And one of the primary reasons he invites us to pause is so that we can remember. Like Mary, we need to take time to ponder and rehearse God's goodness in our lives.

Thank you, God, for the gift of Sabbath and the opportunity it provides to treasure in our hearts the forgiveness and new life you have made possible for us through your Son, Jesus! Amen.

## JOURNALING

*Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.*  
—Psalm 90:12

One possible strategy for remembering is journaling. I kept a journal for each of our children as they were growing up. I recorded special things they said, funny experiences I enjoyed with them, and noteworthy moments that revealed something of who they were becoming.

When my son was married, I read his journal again, intending to find some good material for my “father of the groom speech.” I was delighted to discover a whole host of conversations, incidents, and special moments I had almost completely forgotten about.

We should journal about our relationship with God for the same reason. What did he teach me five years ago? What prayer did he answer three years ago? What new part of his character did I discover seven months

ago? Much of that would be lost if I didn’t journal it.

The writer of Psalm 77 said, “I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago” (v. 11). Writing those events down on paper or in a saved file on your computer can help in the act of remembering.

Psalm 90 tells us to “number our days.” Pause to remember where God has been at work in your life. But don’t just count your days; pause to consider the *meaning* of your days. That’s the gift Sabbath provides!

Thank you, Father, for our memories, by which we can recall the ways you’ve expressed your love for us through Jesus. Your grace has touched our lives again and again! Amen.

## TELLING

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

Telling others is another powerful tool to help us remember God's blessings. Another Psalm text puts it this way: "As for me, it is good to be near God. . . . I will tell of all your deeds" (Psalm 73:28).

There's something about telling another person—about sharing the story of what God has done in our lives, and about saying it out loud—that embeds it in our memory more powerfully than almost anything else we do.

Tell your story to someone this week. Tell it to your Bible study group, or to your spouse. Or maybe a coworker is ready to hear it.

Tell about how God answered a prayer. Or tell of a time in your life when circumstances came together in such a unique way that the only possible explanation was God at work.

Or tell of a significant decision you made in faith and how God provided when you simply stepped forward, trusting him.

Practicing Sabbath is not simply about a particular day in the week. It's about a lifestyle. When you're practicing the disciplines of pausing and remembering, you're laying the groundwork for telling others about all God has done for you. You're practicing Sabbath, regardless of what day of the week it is!

O God, you have shown me such tremendous love through your Son, Jesus! Help me to take the opportunity to share with someone the story of what you have done for me through him. Amen.

## EMBRACING RELATIONSHIPS

*When the Pharisees saw this, they said to [Jesus], "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath."*

—Matthew 12:2

Another Sabbath practice to develop is that of embracing people. Sabbath invites us to value the relationships that God has placed in our lives.

The Pharisees were deeply disturbed by the Sabbath habits of Jesus and his disciples. As far as they were concerned, thirteen men walking through a field picking heads of grain was harvesting, and rubbing those grains together and blowing off the chaff to eat the grain was threshing. The Pharisees, in an attempt to safeguard the Sabbath from work, had strictly forbidden both activities.

Jesus reminded them, however, that even their greatest earthly king, David, had once eaten consecrated bread in a time of need. Jesus was referring to a time when David was running for his life from King Saul and, in desperation, had gone

to the high priest to get food for his men (1 Samuel 21:1-6). The only food available was the consecrated bread that only the priests were allowed to eat. Although he no doubt struggled with the decision, the priest rightly decided to offer David the bread.

The needs of people trump rules and regulations. Because people are vitally important to God, embracing others is another vital Sabbath practice for us.

Thank you for the many people you've placed in our lives, O God. Help us to be mindful of them and to reach out to them with your compassion, love, and care. In Jesus, Amen.

## MERCY, NOT SACRIFICE

*"If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent."*

—Matthew 12:7

Although the Pharisees had condemned him for working on the Sabbath, Jesus reminded them that the temple priests also worked on the Sabbath, yet no one condemned them.

The ceremonies the priests performed daily in the temple were so central to Israel's religious life that no one would even *think* of reproaching them for working on the Sabbath. The rituals they practiced and the sacrifices they offered were all intended for Israel's good! The smoke that rose daily from the altar of sacrifice reminded those who came to the temple that God's promise of forgiveness was for all who would simply seek him with a believing heart.

Sacrifice *was* important. God had taught from the beginning that his forgiveness required the shedding of blood. That's why the shedding of Jesus' blood

was so significant. He became the sacrifice "once for all" to save us from our sin (Hebrews 9:26).

But the *ritual* of sacrifice was never first and foremost what God was after. It was the *heart*. God doesn't want hearts that have become numb by simply going through motions. He wants hearts that have been softened. He wants hearts that have turned away from self-centeredness and see the needs of others. In other words, he wants to see *mercy* in us.

Father, help me to extend your love to others. Open my eyes to the needs around me so that I can be a person whose life is marked by mercy. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## FREE TO SERVE OTHERS

*“How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”* —Matthew 12:12

As he traveled toward the synagogue with the Pharisees close behind, Jesus met a man who had a shriveled hand.

Except for cases in which someone's life was in danger, the Pharisees considered healing another type of work not allowed on the Sabbath.

But Jesus said, “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a person than a sheep!” Then he told the man to stretch his hand out and, as he did, his hand was completely restored!

Jesus summed up what the Pharisees had just seen in this way: “Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” As he had just told them recently, God desires mercy more than sacrifice (Matthew 12:7).

The rhythm of our lives is to include the practice of mercy. We're to embrace *people* over and above *things*. By our actions, others should be able to see that relationships are important to us. Relationships matter to us. People count.

Practicing Sabbath is about being free to serve others in our daily lives. We need to intentionally and deliberately take time for the people God has placed all around us: our family, our church family, other friends, and people in our community.

Father in heaven, keep us from selfish distractions. May we learn to look not only to our own interests but also to the interests of others. In Jesus, Amen.

## THE PEOPLE BUSINESS

*God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

—John 3:16

God values people so deeply that he resolved to stop at nothing to reach out to us with his love. Even when it meant taking on human flesh and then offering himself as a sacrifice for our sin, the Lord showed himself willing.

The price of sin against the God who is holy is so costly that it carries the penalty of death (Romans 6:23). Yet God, in mercy, chose to pay that price for us. Because of his love for us, he determined to make things right between heaven and earth. His own Son would offer up his life, covering the cost of sin “once for all” (Hebrews 9:12). The only thing required of us is that we receive him in faith.

Because God is in the people business, we’re called to make people our priority as well. Whenever we call on someone

who is ill, or we write a card of encouragement to someone in need, or we care for the children of a single parent so that the parent can find some rest, then we’re embracing mercy, an important Sabbath practice, regardless of the day of the week.

How are you practicing mercy in your community? How are you embracing people in your neighborhood? How are you putting people first?

Dear God, thank you for valuing us so deeply that you sent your Son to offer his life on our behalf! Enable us to embrace him in faith, and to embrace the people around us with his love. Amen.

## GOD IS LOVE

*Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.*

—1 John 4:8

You can't take the love out of God and still have God. Love is God's nature; it defines God's core. If God had DNA, each of his genes would be encoded with love.

We tend to place limits on our love, but God's love is unconditional. King David was an adulterer, the apostle Paul was a murderer, and one of Jesus' disciples, Peter, was a betrayer. But none of them ever reached the end of God's love. Each was used mightily in God's kingdom.

You and I will never reach the end of that love either (see Romans 8:38-39). As we look to Jesus and the cross, we will discover God's love for us again and again.

That's the love we're free to share as people who practice Sabbath keeping. It's not a love we somehow muster up from

within ourselves; it's *God's* love that we're called to share! God's love gives, shows mercy, heals, and forgives.

We're free to share the love of God every day. Sabbath is about a lifestyle that we engage in every day. As we grow in our willingness and ability to share God's love with others, we soon discover new depths of God's mercy *toward us*, and new ways of sharing that mercy with others each day of our lives.

We stand amazed, O God, at how deep and full your love is! Thank you that in Jesus you never stop loving us. May we learn to more fully share that love with others. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

## REJOICE IN THE LORD

*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*

—Philippians 4:4

Pausing from work, remembering God's goodness, and embracing people—all of these are important Sabbath disciplines that should mark our living. But the concept of Sabbath also calls us to another practice: rejoicing!

There were two women in the church at Philippi who apparently couldn't see eye to eye on some important issue. But in the midst of their dispute, Paul had a single word of advice for them: "Rejoice!" In essence, Paul said to them, "Take your focus off yourselves and how you think you've been wronged and look to God instead. He's the one who loves you both and offers you forgiveness. If you put your eyes on him, you'll soon find yourselves able to love and forgive. Your disagreements will be dissolved by the joy you share in

him. Rejoice in him always! I'll say it again: rejoice!"

Paul's advice came from his own experience with difficulties. He was in prison when he wrote these words, and he knew all about hard times. And he had discovered that joy was possible even in the midst of the worst disagreements or most difficult circumstances. As we'll see over the next few days, discovering, experiencing, and celebrating the power of that joy is also part of what it means to be a Sabbath keeper.

Father in heaven, joy seems so elusive to us at times. Help us to move our focus from our circumstances to your promises and goodness. Then we'll be able to discover true joy in you! Amen.

## THE SOURCE OF JOY

*I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.*  
—Philippians 3:8

Our *happiness* typically depends on our circumstances. When things are falling into place and going my way, I feel happy!

But when the rain comes or I'm stuck in a long line, when I lose my job or when someone cheats me or ignores me, then I'm unhappy.

Joy, though, is something different. Joy doesn't depend on circumstances. Joy is an attitude of the heart that lives so deep that circumstances can't touch it. To practice the Sabbath discipline of rejoicing, we need to learn where to find joy.

Real joy is found in the greatness and wonder of knowing Jesus. That was the one grand passion of the apostle Paul: to *know* Jesus. He wasn't content with simply knowing *about* Jesus. Paul's deepest desire was

to personally know Jesus' character, love, and grace.

When Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthian church, he said, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). And in our reading today, Paul says to the Philippian Christians, "I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." Nothing took a more central place in Paul's life.

The ultimate source of joy is to really know Christ!

Father, I want to know Jesus. By your Spirit, help me come to a deeper experience of your love and grace shown to me through your Son. In his name I pray. Amen.

## EXPERIENCING JOY

*I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.*

—Philippians 3:10

The apostle Paul made clear that his greatest joy was found in knowing Jesus. Even more specifically, his rejoicing was in Jesus' death and resurrection, noting "participation in his sufferings." Another Bible version refers to this as "the fellowship of his sufferings." Paul wanted to know how Jesus had suffered for sin, and how he had then also conquered death.

Jesus' death and resurrection go hand in hand. Without the resurrection, the cross wouldn't mean anything. Jesus would be just another of the countless people put to death by the Romans.

But in raising Jesus from the dead, God was saying, "I accept his sacrifice. His death was the 'once for all' payment for sin [see Hebrews 7:27]. The fact that I've raised him from the

dead is my stamp of approval on his sacrifice."

Without the resurrection, we're left with nothing. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:14: "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith." And just a few lines later he adds, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile . . . we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:17, 19).

Keeping Sabbath is about experiencing the joy of Jesus' death and resurrection!

Thank you, God, for Jesus. In his death my sin has been paid for; and in raising him from the dead, you have promised me new life. Help me rejoice in his suffering and resurrection. Amen.

## THE LORD'S DAY

*On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and . . . kept on talking until midnight.*

—Acts 20:7

Jesus' resurrection was so central for the early believers that many decided to come together to celebrate their risen Lord on the first day of each week.

Why Sunday instead of Saturday, the Sabbath? Because it was the on first day of the week that Jesus rose from the dead (see Mark 16:2). What day could possibly be *more* suited to worship and celebration than the day Jesus was raised?

Sunday quickly became known as the "Lord's Day." And the New Testament clearly shows that soon after Jesus' resurrection the believers began setting aside Sunday as a day of special celebration. In today's reading, for instance, we learn how the church came together on the first day of the week to break bread and listen to Paul preach. Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 16:2, we're told it was the first day of

the week when believers were asked to bring their money offerings to the Lord.

For the church still today, Sunday is most often recognized as the day of gathering, the day of worship, the day of celebration, and the day of feasting.

A significant way to practice the Sabbath discipline of rejoicing is by gathering with fellow believers each Lord's Day to rejoice in Jesus' resurrection!

Father, as I gather with fellow believers to worship this coming Lord's Day, help me to rejoice in the tremendous news that Jesus has been raised from the dead and now reigns as Lord of lords! Amen.

## THE GENTLE WHISPER

*And after the fire came a gentle whisper.*

—1 Kings 19:12

A close cousin to the Sabbath disciplines we've been exploring this month is the practice of silence and solitude.

In many cultures around the world today, especially in cities, silence can be hard to find. Our lives are inundated with noise. Music is always playing somewhere close by. Other electronic devices like TVs or computers are a daily part of our existence. There's the sound of traffic, roadwork, lawnmowers, and more. Even when we escape the more obvious sources of noise, we often experience "white noise"—the hum of a refrigerator or the ticking of a clock. There's a conspiracy of noise all around us!

If we never withdraw from the hustle and bustle, the constant flurry of activity swirling around us, we run a great risk. Constant noise can drown out the voice

of God in our lives until it can barely be heard. Mother Teresa once said, "We need to find God . . . [but] he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence."

Elijah discovered that God rarely shouts. He wasn't found in the violent wind, the earthquake, or the flash fire. Instead, God made himself present to Elijah through a gentle whisper. God's signature is a still, small voice. In order to hear it, you have to be still.

O whispering God, I need to create opportunities to withdraw from the demands of my day to a quiet place where I can be fully attentive to you. Help me train my spirit to hear your Spirit. Amen.

## CONVERSATION BETWEEN FRIENDS

*Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"*  
—Acts 9:3-4

Elijah learned that God speaks in hushed tones (1 Kings 19). That's not to say, however, that God never shouts.

While he was persecuting the young church of Jesus Christ, Saul (also known as Paul—Acts 13:9) had an encounter with Jesus, who spoke dramatically and forcefully to him. Saul was on his way to Damascus intending to storm synagogues and arrest Christian believers. Before reaching the city, however, Saul was stopped by a light from heaven that flashed around him, blinding him, dropping him to his knees.

Then he heard a voice that could also be heard by those traveling with him: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Through this encounter, Saul came to know the living Lord Jesus, and he was eventually

baptized and commissioned as an apostle to the Gentiles.

When God needs to shout, he does. But typically that's when we haven't been listening to him in the quiet. Saul had been living his life with his ears plugged to God's promptings through the Spirit and, as a result, God needed to take action to get his attention.

God's desire, however, is to speak to us as friends (John 15:15). In the intimacy of solitude he speaks quietly and makes himself known to us.

Father, thank you for the invitation to withdraw from the noise and busyness of the world and to enter into friendship with you. Tune my spirit to your Spirit so that I can hear you speak. Amen.

## NOT BY BIT AND BRIDLE

*Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle.* —Psalm 32:9

In the Old Testament, God spoke to people in many interesting ways. He spoke to Moses through a burning bush (Exodus 3:1-6). He spoke to Balaam through a donkey (Numbers 22:26-31). He gave signs to Gideon through a fleece (Judges 6:36-40).

We often wish God would speak to us in some extraordinary way today. If only he would write his will for us in big letters across the sky. If only he would shout the answer we're seeking from the mountaintops!

Ironically, God's people of the Old Testament longed for the day when God would speak not through dramatic signs but, rather, in the way he most often speaks to believers today. The prophets spoke of an age when God's Spirit would be graciously poured out on all people so that he could speak to them

from within (Joel 2:28-29). With the arrival of Pentecost, that day is now here (Acts 2:14-21). We are now God's temple, where God's Spirit dwells (1 Corinthians 3:16)!

It's not God's plan to drag us around with a bit and bridle. That's how animals with no understanding need to be led. God has his loving eye on us and desires to instruct, teach, and counsel us from within by his Spirit. When we develop the discipline of silence and solitude, we will find God consistently speaking to us, leading us by his gentle nudges and promptings within.

So often, God, we look for dramatic answers to our questions. Teach us to listen for your Spirit speaking within us. Amen.

## JESUS' PATTERN

*Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray."*

—Matthew 26:36

Before Jesus began his earthly ministry, he spent forty days alone in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11). On the night of his arrest he also spent time in solitude. In the Garden of Gethsemane he withdrew from most of his disciples to pray, taking only three of them with him. Then he withdrew from those three to be completely alone in silence with his Father.

The beginning and end of Jesus' ministry were characteristic of everything in between. Seeking silence and solitude was Jesus' lifelong pattern.

Before he chose his disciples, Jesus spent an entire night alone in the hills (Luke 6:12). After Jesus heard the news that John the Baptist had been killed, "he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place" (Matthew 14:13). Then, a bit later, after feeding more than five thou-

sand people through a miracle, Jesus dismissed the crowd and "went up on a mountainside by himself to pray" (Matthew 14:23).

If the Son of God regularly withdrew to meet with his Father, then surely we may (and ought to) do the same. If Jesus needed silence and solitude, then how much more do we need to develop that same discipline!

Father, you long to meet us in the stillness. Help each of us, like Jesus, to seek solitude with you. Thank you for desiring to share your love and grace with us. Amen.

## JESUS AT THE CENTER

*Do not let anyone judge you by . . . a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.*

—Colossians 2:16-17

The practices of Sabbath we've been exploring this month include pausing from our labors, remembering what God has accomplished for us in Jesus, embracing the value of people, and rejoicing in Jesus' death and resurrection. We've also considered a close cousin to these Sabbath disciplines, the practice of silence and solitude.

Each of these should become part of the rhythm of our lives. If we want to grow in our relationship with Jesus, we'll look for opportunities to practice Sabbath daily.

We should not fall into the trap of thinking about Sabbath strictly in terms of a special day of the week. In fact, Paul warned the Colossian believers not to let anyone judge them by the manner in which a particular feast or day of the week was observed. Keeping religious

festivals and observing religious rites, though important, can never be at the center of a relationship with Jesus. According to Paul, such regulations "have an appearance of wisdom," but in the end, "they lack any value" in empowering us to live holy lives. Israel's festivals and celebrations were only ever intended to point people toward the coming Christ. Such rules were a mere shadow; Christ is the reality!

Jesus needs to be central to all our living—not just on the Sabbath or Lord's Day but every day of our lives.

Thank you, Father, for welcoming us by your grace. Our relationship is founded on what you have done for us in Christ! Amen.

## FALLING SHORT OF GOD'S REST

*Since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.*

—Hebrews 4:1

As God led his people into the promised land of Canaan under Joshua's leadership, he promised they would receive the gift of rest (Joshua 1:13). Many battles ensued, but in the end God provided the rest he had promised. Joshua 11:23 reports, "So Joshua took the entire land, just as the Lord had directed Moses, and he gave it as an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal divisions. Then the land had rest from war." With its boundaries secure and the threats to its well-being removed, Israel had peace.

What Israel failed to recognize, however, was that the Sabbath rest God ultimately intended for them was much more than anything that a tract of land could provide. God was inviting them into *his* rest, a rest that was spiritual and eternal.

We receive that rest, God's Sabbath rest, when we respond to the gospel message in faith. When Christ came, many in Israel failed to receive him and the true rest that he came to provide. Yet, thankfully, God makes clear that "the promise of entering his rest still stands." Just as Israel needed to trust in God to experience the physical rest he had promised, so too eternal rest is still available to anyone who will simply place their hope and trust in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Have you experienced that rest?

O God, we never want to fall short of the rest that only you can give! Thank you that the door remains open for all who wish to enter with a believing heart. In Jesus, Amen.

## THERE REMAINS A SABBATH REST!

*There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God. . . . Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest . . . .*

—Hebrews 4:9, 11

The years Israel spent in the wilderness were a time of testing. Would they learn to trust in God to provide for their every need? Unfortunately, they often grumbled against Moses, God's appointed leader. They complained, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" (Exodus 17:3). They continued to quarrel with one another to the point where they began to doubt whether God was with them at all (Exodus 17:7). They became so angry that Moses began to fear for his life (Exodus 17:4).

Reflecting later on that experience, the psalmist wrote, "Today, if only you would hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did . . . in the wilderness" (Psalm 95:7-8).

The writer of Hebrews wants us to know that "Today" is still the

day of God's grace! Don't follow the example of the people in the wilderness whose hearts were hardened. Enter into the Sabbath rest God has for you. Salvation is not found through our own efforts or our own work. We can rest because Jesus has won salvation for us through his sacrifice on the cross. We don't need to bring anything to God other than our need for mercy.

There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God!

Lord, today I place my trust in you for salvation. Thank you for your Son, Jesus, who made my eternal rest possible by offering his life on my behalf. Help me to rest in him! Amen.

**UNORIGINAL TOPIC?**

*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness . . . .*

—2 Timothy 3:16

Why do people talk so often about the weather? For more than a few of us, it can seem a dull topic for conversation.

Yet our comments on weather often jumpstart more than simply a polite conversation; they have a power to foster an instant connection even between strangers. After all, things like rain and sunshine affect everyone. And talking about weather can lead into a lot of other subjects.

In the Bible we find many passages that describe meteorological phenomena and reflect on weather-related images. Sometimes the biblical authors deal with cataclysmic events like the flood (Genesis 6-8). At other times, it's something more common—like sunshine, rain, heat, and wind.

Just like everything else we find in the Bible, we must pay close

attention to weather-related Scriptures. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the biblical authors included such passages for a reason. Stories and images about weather bring forth important lessons about the nature of God and his kingdom. They can also serve as a starting point for conversations on a range of other topics that are important for our spiritual growth!

Let us be prayerful and patient as we dig deeper into God's Word for new and exciting insights this month.

Heavenly Father, we praise you for giving us the Bible, your written Word! From your Word we are taught and corrected in our daily walk with you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## THE MIGHTY GOD

*“Whose hands have gathered up the wind? Who has wrapped up the waters in a cloak?”*  
—Proverbs 30:4

Extreme weather can both fascinate and scare us. Even seeing tornados, storms, and tsunamis on TV makes us feel weak and vulnerable. Despite all kinds of scientific advances, we often see meteorological phenomena as something dangerous, random, and barely predictable.

Yet any description of weather-related events in the Bible shows that they don't just happen. The Bible underscores that God Almighty is fully in control of all his creation at all times. God the Creator controls and uses all things for his purposes—even the weather.

In today's verses the divinely inspired author uses a set of rhetorical questions to marvel at God's greatness as the Creator and Sustainer. Can any human being set the direction of the strong wind or bring it to a halt? No, only God can do that. Can a

human being control the mighty ocean waves or storms? Again, a resounding no. Those are God's exclusive areas of expertise.

We can detect the Lord's awesome grandeur and power when we look around and observe his deeds in nature. But only God's flawless Word, the Bible, gives us a complete picture of who he is. In the person of Jesus Christ he becomes our strong shield and most secure refuge.

Father, we marvel at your might, revealed in your control over the weather. But we are amazed even more by the power of your love for us that you reveal in Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

## FORTY DAYS THAT DROWNED THE WORLD

*But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.*

—Genesis 6:8

One of the first conversations in the Bible about weather provides a description of a truly catastrophic event: the great flood (see Genesis 6:11-7:24). Heavy rain pours down for forty days and forty nights. The waters rise rapidly. Most people and animals perish.

We are told that human corruption and violence brought about this harsh response from the righteous Creator.

Yet one man, Noah, “found favor in the eyes of the LORD.” Noah was righteous and walked faithfully with God. The Lord saved Noah and his family from the flood by means of an ark that he told Noah to build.

Has your home or street ever been flooded? If not, you’ve likely seen pictures of devastation caused by floods elsewhere. I have seen some re-

gions that were flooded by rising rivers, and the amount of destruction was staggering. But our sin is even more destructive to our lives than natural catastrophes can be.

The gospel is God’s revelation of how to find favor with him and be saved from the destructive forces of our sins. We have to board the “ark” that is Jesus Christ, through faith in his gracious love. Our walk with God includes reading his Word, prayer, and love for others. And God assures us that no force will ever separate us from his love and protection (Romans 3:38-39).

Father, thank you for giving us salvation through Jesus Christ! Help us to seek your favor and righteousness in him. Amen.

## THE RAINBOW

*"This is the sign of the covenant that I am making between me and you . . . a covenant for all generations to come."*

—Genesis 9:12

The rainbow is one of the most beautiful meteorological phenomena we can enjoy. Reflected in airborne water droplets, the sun's rays create an optical miracle.

As a child, seeing a rainbow after a rain shower made me feel happy. I was mostly excited about the fact that the weather was finally getting better and I could play outside. I still remember my surprise when after reading the Bible I discovered that the arc of the rainbow signifies much more than simply the end of a spell of bad weather.

The rainbow has to do with the everlasting covenant, or agreement, that God made with all of Noah's descendants and every living creature on earth after the flood. "Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood." That was God's

unconditional promise, and the rainbow is God's beautiful and powerful sign of that promise.

In the Bible we find descriptions of various covenants. All of them foreshadow the ultimate and most important one called the new covenant. Just like the covenant with Noah, the new covenant is an unconditional divine promise. Our Lord Jesus instituted this covenant by his death on the cross. It is a saving covenant of God's grace, sealing the forgiveness of our sins and God's special relationship with us.

Our Father, thank you for your new covenant! We trust in Jesus Christ alone for righteousness and the forgiveness of sins. Praise be to you! Amen.

## A PRAYER IN A THUNDERSTORM

*Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*

—Philippians 4:6

When I was a teenager, I remember my grandmother following a tradition of quietly praying during every thunderstorm. She didn't seem to be scared or worried, but she still prayed.

At that time I wasn't a Christian, and one time I challenged my grandma by saying that her prayers weren't necessary, because scientists explained what lightning and thunder are all about. Besides, our building had a lightning rod on top!

She softly replied to me that everyone needed to pray to God. We need a personal connection to God to feed our faith. And there are many other people out there who need our prayers too—including those who are outside during a thunderstorm.

Today I know that my grandmother was right. The Bible

teaches us how to live happily in a grumpy and worrisome world. We can pray to God and rejoice in him because he is always near. We are encouraged to present our prayer requests to God in every situation—including when we are in the midst of a thunderstorm, whether literally or figuratively.

If you aren't in the habit of regularly communicating with God in prayer, you don't have to wait for a special occasion. Why not try it today? Prayer can be a great source of comfort and encouragement in your relationship with God.

Father, thank you for the great privilege of communing and fellowshiping with you in prayer. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## SUN AND RAIN

*“Your Father in heaven . . . causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”*

—Matthew 5:45

Our Scripture reading for today highlights a seemingly impossible command: “Be perfect . . . as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Jesus sets before us the ideal of perfect love, God’s high standard that we must always strive for. He demands that we go as far as to actively love even our enemies.

To bring his point across, Jesus uses the examples of sunshine and rain. For people in agricultural settings, sun and rain are vivid proofs of God’s bountiful love. They are manifestations of God, who gives good gifts and shows his love to people—even to those who are evil.

When, by the power of the Holy Spirit, God makes us his children, we start walking in love because we’re in his family. John Calvin, an influential French theologian and pastor, taught, “Christ testifies that this

will be the mark of our adoption [into God’s family] if we are kind to the bad and unworthy.”

Jesus wants us to look with God’s eyes on everyone whom we meet on our journey through life, to overcome evil with good, and to wear down hatred by showing love.

As we walk in Christ, we are surrounded by all kinds of people. We must always remember that we are called by him to love not only our friends but also our enemies.

Lord, in the bright light of your perfection we discover our own imperfections. Fill us with your Spirit so that we may know how to love others, even our enemies! Amen.

## SUMMER DAY

*God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.*

—Genesis 2:3

Driving in an air-conditioned car on a hot summer day can be fun—that is, if your car's engine doesn't overheat! Back when I was a seminary student, my gently used car displayed this unfortunate tendency. At such moments I would turn off my air conditioning and turn on the heater. That was the advice I received from my mechanically inclined friends.

But once, on a very hot day, this technique failed to work. The overheated engine died, and I was stranded on a highway for a few hours. A mechanic who later fixed my car told me that I should have paid closer attention to the temperature gauge, since the weather was so hot.

As any pastor knows, good summer weather can be detrimental to church attendance. A day on the beach or a long walk in the park is great. But are you

ever tempted to skip going to church for those activities? It's good to spend time resting and relaxing, but don't forget to allow God to renew your weary soul as well.

We have to pay close attention to our spiritual temperature gauge. Just like our body, our soul needs regular maintenance. The Lord himself blessed the seventh day and made it holy. As children of God, we require regular time off to rest and be spiritually recharged in his presence.

Our Father, we need your wisdom to combine both physical and spiritual rest. Help us to always find time for you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## CLIMATE CHANGE

*God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over . . . all the creatures." —Genesis 1:26*

Many studies maintain that the earth's climate is changing. The average temperatures are rising, weather patterns are adjusting, and the ice caps are melting.

I can see some climate-related changes in my native city of Moscow. Our winters have become milder, and the summers are much hotter. As a result, vegetation and animal life in the city parks has changed. In my childhood I never saw the birds that I see today. Human influence might be a factor causing this recent change.

As Christians, what's our responsibility? The biblical story of creation names us as stewards, or caretakers, of God's creation. Our dominion over creation shouldn't be understood as a license to exploit it. The Bible is clear that we must protect the environment from sinful greed.

Have you ever been asked to look after someone else's expensive home while they were away? The owner welcomes you, saying, "Make yourself comfortable, take whatever you want from the refrigerator, and enjoy yourself!" But this hospitality doesn't mean you can trash and destroy the property or let your friends do that.

We should seek to fulfill our stewardship calling through wise decision making in our consumption. We should also actively participate in recycling and take up other environmentally friendly practices in our communities.

Our Father, thank you for this beautiful earth you have entrusted to us. Help us to learn how we can become better stewards of your creation. Amen.

## THE JOY OF SALVATION

*Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness . . .*

—Psalm 51:7-8

Tamila, a woman from the Central Asian country of Uzbekistan, shared her pain and agony with us. She had had an abortion. Now she was going through tremendous emotional and spiritual anguish. She wrote that she couldn't imagine God ever forgiving her.

As we honestly look at ourselves against the background of God's righteousness, we sometimes feel like Tamila. Our sins might be different, but the pain can be just as intense.

Psalm 51 gives us guidance and hope when we struggle with our sinfulness. The psalmist turns to God with a prayer for forgiveness and restoration. In poetic language he asks the Lord to cleanse him with an herb used in ancient Israel after being healed of a "defiling skin disease" (Leviticus 14:2-4), such as leprosy. And the psalm-

ist is not simply wishful in his request. He is assured that the merciful Lord will cleanse him so well that he will be "whiter than snow."

Picture for a moment a fresh snowfall so bright that people have to wear sunglasses. God is able to make even the darkest pages of our lives much brighter than that snow—if we genuinely repent and ask for forgiveness in Jesus' name.

God forgives us; he cancels the debt of our sin. He restores our relationship with him and graciously grants us the inner peace and joy of his salvation.

Father, cleanse us of all our sins. Create in us a pure heart. Let us be glad and rejoice in your salvation. In Jesus, Amen.

## THE SUN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

*“But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves.”*

—Malachi 4:2

The warm sun on your face and a fresh sea breeze—what can be more relaxing than a beach vacation?

But the sun does more than warm our skin. Without it, no life would be possible on earth. The sun gives energy. In one minute it provides enough power to supply the world’s energy needs for one year.

In the last chapter of the Old Testament the prophet Malachi talks about the rising of the “sun of righteousness.” This sun emits a huge amount of power. It grants healing, joy, and energy to all who revere the Lord’s name. The image of playful calves enjoying their freedom underscores the energizing power of this sun. But it doesn’t give cheer and comfort to everyone. For those who do evil “it will burn like a furnace.”

The New Testament calls Christ the rising sun from heaven. That’s why the Christian church has viewed Malachi’s words as a prophecy about Jesus. It is Jesus who gives us the joy of salvation and healing to our souls. It is Jesus who will preside over the final judgment against evil-doers.

Much of Malachi’s ministry had to do with calling people to repentance. By God’s grace we still have an opportunity to repent of our sins and prepare for the rising of the sun of righteousness. Please, don’t miss it!

Our Father, we repent of our wrongdoings and trust Christ alone for our salvation. As your children, we look forward to the rising of your sun of righteousness. Amen.

## HELP IN STORM

*They cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress. He stilled the storm to a whisper.*

—Psalm 107:28-29

Mikhail, our ministry worker in St. Petersburg, Russia, used to work on a commercial ship that routinely crossed the Atlantic. He recalls times when the ship encountered raging storms. Theirs was a large modern ship, but in the midst of high waves and strong gusts it looked and felt like a little toy. Everyone on board felt afraid and helpless.

You can imagine the fear of ancient sailors when they had to cross the sea without modern navigation equipment, radios, and weather reports. Encountering a major storm back then often meant death.

In today's reading the psalmist describes such an event. Sea merchants are in a terrifying storm. Scared, they cry out to the Lord. He hears them, and in his mercy he stills the storm and guides them to safety.

We might never experience a real storm at sea. But at some point we will go through challenging or even tragic times. Maybe right now you are in a situation that can be described as a life storm. You desperately need the redeeming hand of God.

The psalmist tells us that in those moments we shouldn't feel shy about crying out to God. We also have to be patient and faithful in waiting for his deliverance. We should also remember to give thanks for whatever blessings we have, despite our difficulties.

Father, we have the privilege of asking for your help in the storms of life. Thank you for your gracious deliverance in times of trouble. Amen.

**PRAISE THE LORD!**

*Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths, lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding.*

—Psalm 148:7-8

The road to my middle school in Moscow wound through a picturesque park. In the spring, when the weather was good, I'd often skip the bus and walk the three miles instead.

As I walked through the park, I was always fascinated with the sights and smells and sounds of nature around me. Back then I didn't know much about God or Christianity, but I could detect something awe-inspiring that I couldn't explain.

In today's reading God's whole creation is called to praise the Lord. Amazingly, even such weather-related things as lightning, hail, snow, and stormy winds are joining in this song of lavish celebration. How are they praising the Lord? They are doing what they are called to do by their Creator. For instance, the stormy wind fulfills

its task of praise by being a stormy wind.

It's sad that often we are so distracted by artificial pictures and noises that we cannot hear this jubilant choir. Enjoying nature can be so good for the soul. It might even put us in the mood to praise our Creator.

Human beings, as the crown of God's creation, are invited to join in praising the Lord too. Ours is a very special part. Unlike hail and snow, we can pray or sing a song. We praise God by living out our calling in Jesus Christ.

Father, we thank you for the beauty of your creation. Give us a heart of praise, and show us how we can better glorify your name in our lives. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

## HAIL

*"The thunder will stop and there will be no more hail, so you may know that the earth is the LORD's."*  
—Exodus 9:29

I once had a chance to see the devastation brought by a short yet powerful hailstorm. My friends' house roof was damaged, and their car was covered with hundreds of small dents.

The seventh plague that the Lord brought on Egypt for their disobedience was a hailstorm. But it was much more widespread and powerful than the one I experienced. This calamity had the purpose of forcing the king of Egypt to let God's people go free to worship him. It also demonstrated to everyone God's rule over his creation.

The French theologian John Calvin used the Bible's description of the plagues to reflect on the connection between God's sovereignty and human responsibility. As Christians, we believe in God's unlimited power. But that doesn't take away our

responsibility for making the right choices.

The plague of hail led Pharaoh, for the first time, to recognize his sins. Sadly, this confession wasn't sincere, and he continued in his wicked ways.

Sometimes we are also like that. We experience a crisis situation, and we make a good decision for our spiritual life—but then we don't follow through. Don't delay in fulfilling your promises to the Lord. There's still time to find peace with him in Jesus Christ. This opportunity will not last forever.

Sovereign and all-powerful Lord, I praise you for giving me time and opportunities to make the right choices. Help me to follow you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## FUN IN THE SUN

*You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.*  
—1 Corinthians 6:19-20

August is often the perfect time to hit the beach. That can be a great family event—and yet there are dangers involved. One of them is excessive exposure to the sun.

Scientific research suggests that the growing rate of skin cancer is connected to overindulgence in sunbathing. Such use of the sun is a relatively new cultural phenomenon. And although the modern state of Israel is home to many beautiful beaches, the Bible doesn't speak directly on this issue. (In fact, there are some harsh words against sun worshiping in the Old Testament.)

Perhaps the apostle Paul gives us the best advice related to our leisure time at the beach. He teaches that our bodies are “temples of the Holy Spirit.” The biblical principle in this passage is that we are called to value our bodies and take good care of them.

According to the American Cancer Society, the best way to lower the risk of non-melanoma skin cancer is to avoid long exposure to intense sunlight and practice sun safety.

Let us remember that Jesus gave his own body to save us. And we are encouraged to be good stewards of our physical bodies as well as our souls, because we belong to God both physically and spiritually. God wants us to be as healthy as possible so that we can serve him and our neighbor.

Father, thank you for saving me through the sacrifice of your Son, Jesus Christ. Give me wisdom to take good care of my body and soul, for I know they belong to you. Amen.

## GOD'S HELP IN DROUGHT

*"You will drink from the brook, and I have directed the ravens to supply you with food there."*  
—1 Kings 17:4

Our listener Tatyana could hardly cope with her loss. Her father died unexpectedly. To quote her, after the funeral she found herself in "great emotional drought and pain." Tatyana's eventual healing came through prayers, reading of the Psalms, and the caring hearts of her church friends.

In today's Scripture we read about a drought in ancient Israel. But in the drought, the Lord provides special care for his messenger, Elijah.

There's nothing unusual about an occasional dry spell in the desert-like climate of the Middle East. However, this time there would be neither dew nor rain for three years. In these extreme conditions Elijah needed God's special provisions. We read that the "word of the LORD" leads the prophet to a safe oasis where he finds

a reliable source of fresh water. Miraculously he is fed by ravens that bring him bread and meat twice a day.

Maybe you find yourself in the midst of a long emotional drought. Don't despair. Help is at hand. In the person of Jesus Christ, God revealed his special care for us. He will help you if you are willing to trust his love.

And if everything is going well in your life, could it be that the Lord wants you to become one of his miraculous "ravens" to take care of others?

Lord, thank you for being with us even when we go through difficult times. May your love in Jesus Christ be our daily comfort and motivation for helping others. Amen.

## THE HEAVY RAIN

*The sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain started falling . . . .*  
—1 Kings 18:45

Oleg started listening to our radio programs because he felt disillusioned. A small business owner, he spent a great deal of time and effort to gain financial security. That would make him happy, he thought. But after succeeding financially, he discovered a huge inner emptiness. “In the end I realized that I didn’t know God and was serving idols instead,” he confessed in his letter to us.

In 1 Kings 18 we discover the dramatic ending to a three-year drought. Elijah, the only messenger of the true God, wins a competition with 450 false prophets as the fire of the Lord burns his sacrifice on Mount Carmel.

But Elijah knows it’s not over yet. He waits for a special sign. There’s a small cloud rising above the sea that eventually brings a huge downpour. The

long and treacherous drought is finally over. The power of the Lord is revealed to everyone. The bitter irony here is that the false prophets were serving Baal, the idol of fertility and rain clouds.

There are many things in this world that taunt us with promises of happiness and fulfillment. But regardless of their promising names and bright packaging, idols cannot help us. Only the true God of the Bible can stop our spiritual drought when we turn to him in faith and repentance.

Heavenly Father, give us wisdom to turn away from tempting, yet empty, idols. Thank you for giving us true happiness and purpose in Jesus Christ. Amen.

## HEARING GOD

*“Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.”*  
—1 Kings 19:11

“Why doesn’t God reveal himself to me? I cannot trust him unless I experience him through a clear, miraculous sign!” Our listener Dmitriy from Siberia said this when he connected with us on Twitter. It’s a common sentiment that we receive from our non-believing friends.

In our reply to Dmitriy, we pointed him to today’s passage from 1 Kings. This biblical story shows how we often experience God.

Under a royal death sentence, Elijah fled to a cave on “Horeb, the mountain of God.” He knew that the Lord was about to reveal himself there. Soon a powerful windstorm tore the mountain apart and shattered the rocks. What a frightening display of power! But the Lord was not present in the wind. A miraculous earthquake and fire followed the storm. For Israelites, all those were signs

of God’s presence. But the Lord wasn’t in them.

Unlike his ancestors, Elijah did not experience God in those powerful symbols. Amazingly, he heard the voice of the Lord Almighty where he least expected it—in a gentle whisper!

When we seek the Lord, we have to remember that often he reveals himself and his will to us quietly in a familiar Bible passage, a sermon, a prayer, or a friend’s caring words. We shouldn’t be demanding. Instead, we have to be patient, open and attentive. And then we’ll hear his loving voice.

Father, thank you for sending us your Son, Jesus. Grant us good spiritual hearing to always detect his voice. Amen.

**“THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS NEAR”**

*“When you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”*  
—Luke 21:31

More than a third of Americans believe that recent natural disasters point to Jesus’ imminent return. The Public Religion Research Institute says that this belief is especially strong among Protestants.

Today’s verses are one of the biblical passages that connect Christ’s second coming with weather-related phenomena. Here we read about some truly extraordinary events: “the roaring and tossing of the sea” and “the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”

This is a riveting portrayal of the end times. Provided to give hope and assurance to people in the midst of suffering, it’s more poetry than instruction manual. First, Jesus talks about “signs” that will be evident to everyone. Then we are told to be alert that the last day will

not close on us “suddenly like a trap.”

One philosopher defined “anxiety” as “the next day.” We do not know what might happen tomorrow. A tragedy strikes someone every day: the loss of a loved one, a divorce, a spot on an X-ray. The time will come when that someone is us. Our world might collapse.

But God is in charge, no matter what happens. He is near. And he will get nearer yet in his time. That’s the sure promise of his eternal Word.

Our Father, what a joy to know that your kingdom is near! Help me overcome my worries, as I look forward to that great day when everyone will see you in your power and glory. Amen.

## STILLING THE STORM

*[Jesus] got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!"*  
—Mark 4:39

Taking a leisurely boat ride might sound like a good idea for summer fun. Many cities located on a river or by a lake are known for their night-time dinner cruises on which passengers can enjoy a meal and the city lights.

But it was different in ancient times. People viewed the sea as the place of chaos and evil forces. Crossing the water was dangerous because of poor boat construction and lack of navigation and communication devices. Unexpected storms often led to tragedy.

Today we read about a boat ride that went terribly wrong. A furious squall came out of nowhere, and waves broke over the boat, nearly swamping it. The disciples (some of whom were experienced fishermen) were desperately afraid. And Jesus was sleeping! They woke

him up, virtually accusing him of their fate. Jesus rebuked the storm, commanding it to be silent. The wind ceased, and a great calm followed.

In this story we see Jesus as a miracle worker. Even more, he is Lord over the forces of nature. That's why the storm obeys him. Further, we discover Jesus' special love and care for his followers. His answer to the disciples' (and our) urgent inquiry in difficult times is "I do care about you! Put all your trust in me, and don't be afraid."

Jesus, give us faith to recognize you as our reliable caretaker and protector. Take away our fears and fill us with awe over your power and love for us, your followers. Amen.

## BLESSED ASSURANCE

*"I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand."*  
—John 10:28

Several years ago some residents of the Russian city of Ulyanovsk filed an unusual suit against the regional weather center. A local family wanted to be reimbursed for their summer weekend that was ruined because of incorrect weather reporting. They booked their last-minute vacation after hearing a glowing weekend forecast. But instead of enjoying the pleasant outdoors, they spent all three days drenched in cold rain.

It turned out that the weather center indeed did forecast mostly sunny weather. However, it also reserved a ten-percent chance for rain. The judge acquitted the defendant.

Have you ever trusted a weather report only to be disappointed later on? Most things in our life seem to have a probability clause attached to them.

But when the Bible talks about assurance of our salvation, it's completely different. There's nothing said about the "likelihood" of being saved. Instead there's the ironclad promise of Jesus himself.

The Bible teaches us that, first, Christ gives us salvation. And he personally makes sure that no one can snatch us out of his hand. That's why those of us who know Jesus as Lord and Savior don't have to worry about the probability of salvation. Instead we can serve him with joy and thanksgiving.

Do you have that blessed assurance?

Jesus, we praise you for granting us the gift of salvation. Thank you for holding us securely in your hand. Amen.

## ONE GOD, ONE MEDIATOR

*There is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.*

—1 Timothy 2:5-6

As an elementary school student, I was fascinated with the southern hemisphere, the part of the earth that is south of the equator. Looking at the school globe, I couldn't understand how people there could walk "upside down." And then I couldn't believe that their coldest months came when we had summer.

Many of our readers are enjoying the warm summer weather this month. But for people in the southern hemisphere it's winter, the coldest part of the year. To be honest with you, I still find this fact intriguing.

But I'm much more fascinated with the fact that people who live in such vastly different lands and cultures can all find salvation in Jesus Christ and in him only.

The triune God of the Bible is not some tribal deity; he is God for all human beings. And Jesus is the only mediator between the heavenly Father and the whole human race.

Of course, people in different cultures and religious traditions have some knowledge of God through his general revelation in nature. But only in Jesus can we find our way to the heavenly Father.

Our reading today is more than an encouragement to pray for everyone in the world. It's a welcome for everyone to find peace with God in the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus, you are our one and only way to heaven. Give us courage and wisdom to proclaim your salvation to everyone on earth. Amen.

## FINDING GOD

*“So that everyone he has made may know his work, he stops all people from their labor.”*  
—Job 37:7

In my early teens I enjoyed a Christian radio drama for kids. It revolved around a girl talking to different animals and insects that would tell her how they manage to survive in a harsh environment. In the end they always underscored that they were created by God.

Is it possible to find God simply by observing his creation? What is the purpose of so-called “general revelation”—the knowledge of God that can be obtained through nature?

Today’s reading addresses this issue in beautifully poetic language. We read how God’s voice “thunders in marvelous ways.” He commands snow and rain. The breath of God makes water freeze. The changes in weather interrupt people from their routine work and make them ponder about the works of God.

But Scripture is clear that all of us are so polluted with sin that we cannot find the saving knowledge of God through nature. We need a Bible for that. A French theologian, John Calvin, compared the Bible to eyeglasses that allow a person with weak vision to see the Savior and creation as they are meant to be seen.

Nature points to its Creator. However, we hear God’s voice most clearly in his written Word. His breath is the Holy Spirit that warms our hearts to the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the breathtaking beauty of your creation! We praise you for the Bible, your written Word that reveals you as our Savior in Christ. Amen.

## THE SPIRIT AS THE WIND

*"No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."*  
—John 3:3

My grandmother spent over forty years praying for her relatives. She wanted us to become followers of Christ. But for a long time she was the only devoted Christian in our family. Only near the end of her life did she see her prayers answered, when many of us became Christians and joined the church.

In today's reading Jesus explains the nature of salvation to Nicodemus, an experienced teacher of God's people. God cannot be reduced to a simple formula. In order to enter the kingdom of God, one has to be born again. And that is the exclusive work of the Holy Spirit. The sovereign Spirit works as he pleases in the renewal of the human heart.

Jesus compares the Holy Spirit to the wind that blows wherever it wants. "Just as you can

hear the wind but can't tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can't explain how people are born of the Spirit" (John 3:8, NLT).

Whether we are concerned with our salvation or that of our loved ones, we must wholeheartedly trust God's grace revealed in Jesus Christ.

The mystery of salvation is deeply rooted in God's boundless love. That's why even the worst sinner can be born again into the kingdom of God. And that's why we can confidently pray for our unsaved loved ones.

Spirit of God, thank you for blowing the love of Christ into our lives. Inspire us to pray for and witness to our unbelieving friends and relatives. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

## GLOBAL COOLING?

*"This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."*

—Matthew 24:14

Recently the media have been paying special attention to global warming. But are we missing another important story? I'm talking about a universal cooling in human relations. Could it be that we are on the brink of an ice age when it comes to human connections within our families, communities, and entire nations?

Jesus warned us that in the last days, "because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold." Our personal experiences and news reports often seem to suggest that many hearts are already in the grips of this deadly cold.

What should we do? Jesus' advice is clear. We have to be strong in our Christian calling, and we have to keep our hearts warm with his love. Regardless of the circumstances, we have to love God above all and love

our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-39).

The prime example of such love is to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with the whole world—with people who live near and far away from us. Instead of being critical and negative, we are called to imitate our Savior in his mercy and to present a positive perspective to our communities. God's Word and godly deeds—those are the things that will keep us all warm and secure until the day of Jesus' second coming.

Our Father, thank you for keeping our hearts warm with your love. Give us strength to persevere when our faith is tempted. Bless us as we share your Word and mercy with the whole world. Amen.

## WHEN NATURE STRIKES

*Do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.*  
—Hebrews 13:16

On March 11, 2011, a powerful earthquake struck the Pacific coast of Japan. It triggered a massive tsunami with waves that engulfed entire towns. Over 20,000 people lost their lives, and tens of thousands were displaced.

In just a few weeks the members of my denomination, the Christian Reformed Church in North America, raised over a million dollars to help those in need. Our relief agency, World Renew, used funds effectively, thanks to a partnership with Japanese Christians. Our media outreach, Back to God Ministries International, began producing a special radio program in the Japanese language to bring spiritual comfort to those living in the affected area.

Natural calamities in faraway communities challenge us and trigger all kinds of responses.

Some people prefer to do nothing. Others limit their involvement to a pious prayer and theological reflection. Still others start blaming God.

Today's reading explains what our immediate response to a tragedy should be. It's then that we as Christians are called to do good and share with those in need. We serve and worship a God who always reaches out in love and compassion. That's why we have to go beyond condolences and kind wishes. If we truly know his saving grace, it is only natural for us to reach out to hurting people with a helping hand and caring heart.

Father, help us praise you not only in word but also in deed. Make us reflectors of your love in this world. In Jesus, Amen.

## TIMES OF DROUGHT

*“Blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him.”*  
—Jeremiah 17:7

Our listener Vera wrote to us after she became a believer and joined a local church. She sounded so upbeat and positive. But a year later we got a message from her, requesting prayers. Her faith was being tested through difficult circumstances.

Such spiritually challenging periods can be compared to droughts. The prophet Jeremiah carried out his ministry in the arid climate of the kingdom of Judah. In today’s reading he gives examples of two plants growing in the same climate.

The first plant is trying to survive in the salty wasteland, without access to fresh water. According to Jeremiah, that’s the person who “trusts in man, who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the LORD.”

The second plant, a tree, is in similarly challenging conditions. But it is planted near a stream, so when heat and drought come, the tree is secure. “Its leaves are always green,” and it keeps bearing fruit. That’s the person who puts all confidence and trust in the Lord.

Often we cannot choose our life circumstances. We go through periods of drought and challenges. Our only hope to survive is to have our roots planted deep by the stream of living water—our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Where are your roots planted?

Father, thank you for providing us with the source of living water in the person of your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us to put all our trust into him only. Amen.

## GOD'S PRESENCE

*A voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love . . . .  
Listen to him!"*

—Matthew 17:5

Often small children will see every cloud in the sky as a little miracle. With their imaginations, they're delighted to discover all kinds of pictures in cloud formations: funny animals, yummy desserts, smiling human faces, and more.

Then children go to school and learn how to classify clouds into various types with strange Latin names. Do they forget how to see things in clouds, how to rejoice over their discoveries? Maybe so.

In the language of the Bible a cloud is often connected with God's presence, glory, and grandeur. Today's passage is about the transfiguration of Jesus. His face shines like the sun, and his clothes become brilliantly white. Then a bright white cloud overshadows everyone present, and a voice says, "This is my Son,

whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

The transfiguration not only supports the identity of Jesus as the Son of God; the voice also reveals that he is the mouthpiece of God. Here we are given a glimpse of God's glorious victory, an assurance that the way of Jesus is indeed the true way. In the transfigured face of Christ God's light shines into our lives.

Next time you see a cloud in the blue sky, may it remind you of God's loving presence, for he is the power behind that cloud and your life.

Father, I praise you for your presence in my life. Give me strength, humility, and wisdom to listen to your Son and to reflect his light into this world. Amen.

## A GREAT CLOUD OF WITNESSES

*Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses . . . let us run with perseverance . . . fixing our eyes on Jesus.*

—Hebrews 12:1-2

In my high school years I ran many 5 kilometer races, but I came in first only once. Not surprisingly, that's the race I remember the most clearly.

When the finish line was close, I found myself competing against the fastest runner in our group. The onlookers started cheering me loudly. In my side view their faces turned into some kind of a fuzzy multi-color cloud. I pulled all my strength and finished first!

The cloud mentioned in today's verse isn't really a cloud at all. It's "a great cloud of witnesses." This is not a description of weather-related phenomena but rather a figure of speech meaning a great number, a multitude.

In Hebrews 11 we find a long list of Old Testament heroes of faith that encourage us with

their example. Today we could add New Testament believers and great heroes of faith from church history. We are also encouraged by many "living saints" in our local churches and extended families.

The race of faith is different from any other race we might run. Instead of competing with others, we are fighting against our own sinful nature. The only hope for us to finish is to give up our sins and to fix our eyes on Jesus, the author of our faith.

Father, we praise you for the example of the heroes of faith who have run this race before us. Give us strength and perseverance, and help us fix our eyes on Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

## GOD'S LEADING

*By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud . . . and by night in a pillar of fire . . . .*  
—Exodus 13:21

Many weather-related phenomena described in the Bible are supernatural. Perhaps the pillar of fire and cloud is the most famous of these.

When Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, the Lord went ahead of them in the form of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. This fiery cloud gave God's people a sense of his guidance, closeness, and protection on their way to freedom through the desert. Later, when the Lord was preparing a path of escape through the Red Sea, the fiery cloud gave light to God's people. But to the armies of Pharaoh it brought a terrifying darkness (Exodus 14:19-20).

Wouldn't it be great to have a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire of our own? Something supernatural that would guide, comfort, and protect us? Actually the Scriptures teach us that

today we are in a much better position than even the ancient Israelites were.

Just before Jesus ascended into heaven he gave us this great promise: "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). Today he is with us in the Holy Spirit. His written Word, the Bible, directs and nourishes us.

Let's humble ourselves before the Lord Jesus and trust in his leading. He will deliver us to freedom.

Lord, we pray that you will continually assure us of your care, love, and concern. Lead, comfort, and strengthen us in our walk of faith, we pray. Amen.

## THE ETERNAL SUN

*"The LORD will be your everlasting light, and your days of sorrow will end."*  
—Isaiah 60:20

One of the poems that many Russian children learn by heart is "A Stolen Sun." It's a story about a crocodile that swallows up the sun. The earth is covered with darkness. Some animals get lost, and others cannot find their food. A bear who has lost his grandchildren reluctantly fights the crocodile. After his victory the sun is released back into the sky, and the bear finds his grandchildren.

On a sunny August day it's difficult to imagine that our sun could ever disappear. But some scientists suggest that it will. Not because of a crocodile. Supposedly our sun will burn out in about 5 billion years from now.

Regardless of the date for the sun's end, the Bible tells us not to be worried. In the New Jerusalem we won't need sun or moon, for the Lord himself will

be our eternal light. All darkness will disappear forever, overpowered by his light of joy and salvation. Our Savior will wipe away all tears from our eyes and destroy death, violence, and pain.

When we reflect about our eternity with the Lord, we are at a loss for words. Here on earth it's not easy to imagine heaven. Filled with symbols, the biblical passages help us discover one great truth: Christ has prepared a joyful place for those who trust in him.

Are you looking forward to spending eternity with Jesus?

Father, we look forward to the day when your everlasting light will completely overpower the darkness. Help us to trust you fully in our daily walk with you. Amen.

## LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE

*“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”*

—Romans 10:13

Many of us are especially attracted to weather forecasts. When a weather report is on the radio or television, we listen intently, trying to process the information. We are mesmerized by the sure tone of the reporter, the countless digits, and the animated movements of cold or warm fronts on the map. There’s something very human in this desire to glance into tomorrow and make sense of the seeming chaos.

Modern meteorology provides only limited precision in forecasting weather for the next few days. Yet it’s still better than many other predictions in our world. So many events may change our life abruptly and unexpectedly.

But today’s verses give us a sense of sure hope when we reflect on our eternal destiny in Jesus Christ. The Bible pro-

claims that we are saved when we call out to Jesus, when we ask for his forgiveness, acceptance, and love. That is God’s ironclad guarantee.

To quote the theologian and pastor John Calvin, “the grace of God penetrates into the abyss of death.” This grace overcomes our sin and secures our salvation. Like the thief on the cross, every one of us has to say, “Jesus, remember me!” (Luke 23:42), and we will be saved. Arguably, that’s the most definite and predictable thing in our lives.

Father in heaven, thank you for assuring our salvation in your grace. With your Spirit, open our hearts to your gospel. Bless us in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.



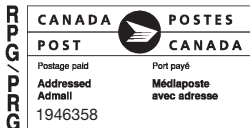
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