



Jan/Feb 2014

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

**STRANGERS
AND PILGRIMS
ON THE JOURNEY**

ALSO: LESSONS FROM EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

Friends:

Happy New Year! While the weather may be cold and dreary in North America and other parts of the world (or maybe hot and arid closer to the equator!), the change of the calendar always carries a tinge of excitement. What will the new year bring? What events are coming at us? Where will I be next year? What achievements or disappointments await me? Like the stairway on our cover, reaching into an open sky, each new year represents the beginning of a new journey!



In February, Jason Zuidema helps us to see that we are strangers and pilgrims on a journey of God's design. For us as citizens of God's kingdom, this world as it stands is not our final destination. We are on a path to something greater!

But, first, in January we explore with Reggie Smith the journeys of Ezra and Nehemiah, who helped lead God's people out of exile and back to living for the Lord in the promised land. They help us rediscover God and his lessons for our future.

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

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Steven Koster". The ink is dark and the strokes are fluid and connected.

—Steven Koster

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and Nehemiah”
Reginald Smith**



**“Strangers and Pilgrims
on the Journey”
Jason Zuidema**

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re FRAME MEDIA

this month

Lessons from Ezra and Nehemiah

Reginald Smith

There are some things that just go great together: peanut butter and jelly, cookies and milk—and Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra was a priest, and Nehemiah was a community builder and government official. Their job descriptions were different, but their goal was the same—to help an exiled people rediscover the God who put them there and learn his lessons for a better future.

What can we learn from a priest and a community builder? Plenty! Let's read their stories, reflect on their insights, and pray for the light of Jesus to help us apply these lessons to our lives.

Reginald Smith and his wife, Sharon, have three teenage daughters—Janelle, Katrina, and Mariah. He has served as pastor of Roosevelt Park Community Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, for nineteen years. He also served churches in Paterson, New Jersey, and Chicago, Illinois, and is a member of the Back to God Ministries International board.

CALLED BACK AND RESTORED

"This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: 'The LORD, the God of heaven . . . has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah.'"

—Ezra 1:2

On September 11, 2001, America watched the World Trade Center towers crumble. The towers were more than just a nice pair of skyscrapers; they represented America's identity.

When the temple in Jerusalem fell in 586 B.C., Israel's identity and center as God's dwelling place came crashing down. Though Israel was God's special people, they had failed to live as he called them to, so God sent them into exile to bring them to their senses.

But God didn't leave them to their own devices. He watched over them for 70 years and then brought them back. How did he do that? In the past God had used special leaders within Israel to point the people back to himself. But this time God appointed a Persian king to see that the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem would be rebuilt.

Cyrus would not have been Israel's first choice. But he was God's choice, and he submitted to God's will.

God can use the most unlikely allies to bring us to himself. God uses people who are open to doing his will over their own.

The past year may have been one of dashed relationships, torn dreams, and broken promises. But God provides an unlikely ally to give us new hope and life. His Son, Jesus, King of all kings, submitted to God's will and gave his own life to pay for our sin. And today, as the risen Savior, he calls us back to God to enjoy full life with him.

Lord, open us to your will, and guide us daily to follow the King who calls us back to you. Amen.

KEEPSAKES

King Cyrus brought out the articles belonging to the temple of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem
—Ezra 1:7

For many years, my mother kept most of my high school awards at her house. I won them in academic competitions with other high school students on Chicago's West Side. But one day thieves came and destroyed old family photos and ran away with my awards. I grieved the loss of those symbols of past achievements.

The Israelites probably thought their old valuables for temple worship had been destroyed long ago. But Nebuchadnezzar had placed the bowls, basins, and other items in the house of his god. And King Cyrus knew where they were. God had a backup plan for his keepsakes. The lost items were returned for use in the new temple.

Was Israel ready to build God's house of worship? Yes. Were the priests excited to lead God's people in worship? Absolutely!

And King Cyrus was ready to give back the stolen items because he knew God had a greater plan at work: to restore his people and guide them back to putting the Lord first in their lives.

God always has a plan for keeping worship vital. Jesus told a Samaritan woman one day that true worship was not tied to things or places. He said, "True worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth" (John 4:23). Does the Lord have first place in your life?

Jesus, I place my complete trust in you as the one who came to take away my sins and restore the joy of my salvation. Let nothing steal my devotion to you alone. Amen.

NAMES MATTER

These are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken captive to Babylon.
—Ezra 2:1

At the end of a movie, do you watch all the credits? Not many people do. The names of the makeup artists or stunt drivers really don't matter to the average moviegoer. Most people aren't interested in that long list of names.

Ezra 2 contains a long list of the names of Israelites who returned from exile. We know very little about most of them, but the Bible takes names seriously because they are connected to the God who knows their stories. These are people who remembered that they were exiled, and God brought them back to live as his people once again.

Ezra kept a careful record of the people who saw God's faithfulness while they were under God's judgment. They knew the story of God's grace as he sustained them during the or-

deal of exile. Every person had a story about God's amazing faithfulness to tell to the next generation.

Our names matter to God! Behind each name is a marvelous story of God's faithfulness, forgiveness, and presence. Our names matter because we are under the Name that saves and redeems us for a greater purpose: the resurrected Jesus. In the name of Jesus, we have a new life, a sure hope, and a secure future. Everyone under the name of Jesus has their name written in the book of life. Is yours?

Father God, thank you that my name has been written into your Book of Life. I know I belong to you alone because you know my name. Amen.

BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF WORSHIP

All the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. —Ezra 3:11

Sporting events are often great places to build community among people. I remember when the 1980 Olympic USA hockey team defeated the heavily favored Russian team to win the gold medal. We were all instant hockey fans.

Today's verses reveal how restored worship for an exiled people deepened their communal lives. The exile community became a God-centered people when they worshiped together. God had to be first in their lives, no matter what. The priests started by building "the altar of the God of Israel." Ezra stated, "Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the LORD." Then the carpenters and bricklayers began building God's house for the purpose of worship. And then the priests—

responsible to lead God-honoring worship—went into action. When the foundation of God's house was complete, they worshiped God with singing and shouts of joy. They sang, "He is good; his love toward Israel endures forever." They were a community of worship.

Community comes when we join others in the acts and actions of worship. How are you preparing yourself for worship? Do you yearn to give the Lord all of your praise? Do you seek to join fellow believers of the Lord Jesus in worship?

Lord, I need to worship with others because I belong to a holy community. Help me to enter the spacious world of your blessing, grace, and forgiveness when I meet with other believers in Christ. Amen.

ENEMIES

The peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building.
—Ezra 4:4

In his book *Answering God*, Eugene Peterson remarks, “Enemies, especially for those who live by faith, are a fact of life. If we don’t know we have them or who they are, we live in a dangerous naivete.”

God’s people had enemies who opposed their becoming a holy people. They were rebuilding the temple when what seemed like a friendly offer to help turned out to be a subversive attempt to stop God’s work. The motives of this offer were quickly discerned. So the enemies tried a different tactic. “The peoples around them set out to discourage the people . . . and make them afraid to go on building. They bribed officials to work against them and frustrate their plans.”

This pressure discouraged the people for a while, and the rebuilding of the temple came to

a standstill. But did God stop working? No. Our enemies may try to delay God’s work, but they can’t stop it.

God eventually sent prophets to inspire and motivate the people to begin rebuilding his temple again (see Haggai 1; Zechariah 1; Ezra 5:1-2).

Philippians 1:6 states, “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” There will always be enemies who try to thwart God’s work, but God is in control. He will complete his good work in all of us.

Dear Lord, I want to think I do not have enemies in my life. But help me discern a realistic picture of the world. Keep me on my knees as I pray for your kingdom to come. Amen.

HELP

The prophets of God were with them, supporting them.

—Ezra 5:2

In February 2013, four people were shot and injured at a bar near my home. This was the second shooting there within a few months; the first had resulted in the death of a young man. We wanted the bar closed. We needed help. The Spirit prompted nearby business owners to write letters to city officials expressing their concerns. Our community police officers gathered past violations on the bar and stepped up enforcement. Within four weeks, the bar was closed.

In today's verses we find that God wanted the people to re-start building the temple. They needed help. So God sent his prophets to the people.

The prophets performed important functions for the people. They helped bring God's presence into their midst. They personally addressed the people,

speaking God's words of authority and reminding them of God's faithfulness in the past. The prophets also worked with the priests and Levites to remind the people of the stories of Abraham, Moses, and David. They helped the people keep faith. With visions from God, the prophets helped the people return to the work of rebuilding, regardless of the circumstances.

Are you struggling in a task for the Lord and ready to give up? The Spirit of God works to remind you that Jesus will be with you always and will bring others to help at the right time. Count on it!

Thank you, Lord, for your help in times of struggle and doubt. Thank you for your presence and work in us. Amen.

BY WHOSE AUTHORITY?

"Who authorized you to rebuild this temple and to finish it?"

—Ezra 5:3, 9

A man moved into a new neighborhood. He loved grilling steaks on Friday. But the neighbors came by and informed him that in this neighborhood fish was the official meat to grill on Friday. Everything went back to normal until the next Friday. The new guy grilled steaks again, and again the neighbors confronted him. The man asked if there was a written rule about fish-grilling. Well, there wasn't a rule, but this was the way things had always been done, so steak-grilling should stop, they said.

There were unwritten rules in the region around Israel too, as God's people rebuilt their temple to the Lord. The neighboring communities thought the rebuilding should stop. They wrote a letter to King Darius, and they were sure the king would see things their way.

In the meantime, the Israelites stood their ground, knowing Cyrus had given them permission earlier. They reaffirmed their identity first as God's people: "We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth. . . ." In addition, they knew they had been exiled because of their disobedience to God. But now they had permission from King Cyrus to rebuild God's temple.

Today we are authorized to be the witnesses of King Jesus in the world. Our identity is in the risen Lord, who is building his kingdom in us, through us, and around us. And by his authority we will build his kingdom by serving him in this world.

Lord, empower me to pray and work as I serve in your world. May I bring glory only to you. Amen.

A LITTLE MESSAGE

A scroll was found in the citadel of Ecbatana in the province of Media, and this was written on it. . . .
—Ezra 6:2

When U.S. president John F. Kennedy was elected in 1960, one item on his ambitious agenda was to pass civil rights legislation. An assassin's bullet stopped him, but Lyndon B. Johnson picked up Kennedy's mantle to make the civil rights bills into law.

King Cyrus had made a little-known decree allowing Israel to rebuild their temple to the Lord (Ezra 1:2-4). Darius, the next king, helped the people continue the work of God.

Tattenai, the local governor, wanted strong evidence to support Israel's rebuilding of the temple. Darius found the message written by Cyrus, who had wanted it known that he was picked by God to help build the Lord's new temple. Cyrus had even laid out specific instructions to follow. So Darius declared, "Do not interfere

with the work on this temple of God." The Lord used these kings for his purpose. A little hidden scroll encouraged the people to see that God wanted his plan to go forward.

Hidden messages can come out and encourage or warn us. An old letter found in a drawer can bring help just when you need it. A call from a friend can come when you need a listening ear. A word from God's story can remind you that he will always be with you. Keep your eyes and heart open for God's messages of love and encouragement to you today.

Holy Spirit, make me attentive to your messages of love, forgiveness, and mercy that may be hidden in plain sight. Help me hear and experience the message of Jesus. Amen.

GET IT DONE

The people of Israel . . . celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy.
—Ezra 6:16

Italy's Leaning Tower of Pisa took 344 years to complete. The Panama Canal took 33 years to build.

It took 20 years to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. The people had fought delays and enemy accusations. They had endured exile. They worked under challenging conditions and stressful situations. But they built the house of God. Worship was at stake. God wanted a place to dwell with his people again.

The temple's completion marked a new beginning for God's people who had lived in exile in a foreign land. They were finally home. God was faithful, and his Word gave them confidence and stamina.

When the work was done, there was just one more thing to do—worship! The people spent seven days in celebration and wor-

ship. They realized that the work was done not because they were great builders. Everything was done by the strong arm and constant care of the Lord. Their complete joy centered on worshipping the Lord.

The Lord Jesus built salvation for us. He came into our broken world. He lived in our skin and embraced all of its pain and limits. He died on a cross to bring us access to the Father. He rose from the grave, putting death to death. Then he returned to heaven to prepare a place for us in the new heaven and earth, where all of life will be worship in God's presence forever.

Lord and Savior, we want to worship and serve you with all our soul, mind, and strength. Amen!

THE FAMILY BUSINESS

*Ezra, son of Seraiah . . . the son of Aaron the chief priest—this
Ezra came up from Babylon.*
—Ezra 7:1, 5-6

Many of us can think of examples of children following in their parents' footsteps or taking on the work of the family business. Ezra followed his father Seraiah in the family of priests. It was his family's calling to lead God's people into the presence of God.

It was important that Ezra understood how he got into the family business. His line went back many generations to Aaron, the chief priest during the time of Moses. Ezra did not strike out on his own to become a priest (mediator) between God and his people. He was born into the position. He was part of the long history of God's faithfulness in providing holy leadership for a reconstituted people. God's business was Ezra's family business, and Ezra was employed by God alone.

As children of God, you and I are brought into the family of God by our high priest, Jesus Christ. The Bible reminds us, "We have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus, the Son of God" (Hebrews 4:14). We are born into the family business of blessing, mercy, forgiveness, and love. As God's dearly loved children, our salvation is provided not because we are great people. It was God's business to make salvation work. Let's give thanks to God that his hand of grace has done everything we need to inherit eternal life!

Father, sometimes I'm tempted to think I earned my way into the family of God. Forgive me. Help me remember that my place in the family comes through Jesus Christ alone. Amen.

UNHINDERED

Praise be to the LORD, the God of our ancestors, who has put it into the king's heart to bring honor to the house of the LORD in Jerusalem in this way.

—Ezra 7:27

The last words about the apostle Paul are extraordinary. Acts 28:31 declares, “He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!” Paul knew his authority came straight from Jesus.

In a similar way, Ezra was authorized by King Artaxerxes to assess and re-establish the people of Israel according to the law of God. Today’s verses describe how God worked through the king to bring God’s people into a new situation to serve him.

In exile, the freedom of the Israelites was restricted. But Ezra reported to Israel that their freedom to worship was now wide open. They could renew the kind of worship that reflected how God had saved them, freed them, and

thus called for their obedience. King Artaxerxes and Ezra both knew they were God’s instruments. They both carried out their God-given roles for his purposes. The king gave Ezra the full protection of his empire to reaffirm Israel’s identity in the one true God, who rules over the kings of the world.

By “the God of heaven,” you are authorized to live an unhindered life of boldness and freedom. You are a letter of God’s grace and mercy! You have the full backing of the Lord, who promises to “be with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28: 20). Live the unhindered life today!

Master, help me to live the life you want—in my home, work, and neighborhood. Amen.

HELP WANTED

When I checked among the people and the priests, I found no Levites there.
—Ezra 8:15

We studied the other couple across the room. My wife and I did not know anyone at this gathering. But it looked as if the couple across the room was in a similar situation. We struck up a conversation and immediately hit it off. My church was looking for a bilingual associate pastor; we hired him. The Lord knew we had a position open, and he filled it!

Before the Israelites ventured to Jerusalem, Ezra had to address a personnel problem: there were no Levites to lead worship. If the resettlement of godly living was going to start right, this issue had to be solved wisely. But how?

Ezra believed that God was with them, and that set the tone for discerning God's will. Ezra, along with other experienced leaders, prayed and fasted, asking for God's help. Ezra put the Lord first, asking God to fill the

Levite positions with capable people. Ezra centered Israel's life on its worship of the Lord. And God answered.

Proper worship is vital. It pulls our busy, technology-heavy lives away to where we realize our help comes from God alone. Preachers and worship leaders help us to enter into the large, spacious world of grace and salvation. Together they prepare the kind of worship that focuses on God at the center of all things.

Thank your church's worship leader today. Tell your pastor you appreciate their leading and preaching. They are helping you see how big Jesus is.

Lord, thank you for the vital work of worship in your church. Amen.

A PRAYER OF CONFESSION

I rose from my self-abasement, with my tunic and cloak torn, and fell on my knees with my hands spread out to the LORD my God and prayed.

—Ezra 9:5-6

The leaders of Israel approached Ezra with bad news. While building God's house, Israel was still following their own desires. Everyone was guilty. The leaders and officials led the way in unfaithful living.

Discouraged, Ezra likely wanted to walk away after all the hard work he had done. But he chose a better way: He "fell on [his] knees . . . and prayed."

First, Ezra admitted his sins and the sins of the people. Then he recounted the Lord's faithfulness and confessed that the people had failed to apply God's Word to their daily lives as holy people of the Lord. They had mixed with the people around them and accepted their "detestable practices"—that is, the worship of other gods and the immorality that went with it: perverse sexual relations, child sacrifice, occult practices, and

more (see Leviticus 18-20; Deuteronomy 7:3-4; 18:9-13). Ezra also appealed to God's character: "Lord, the God of Israel, you are righteous!" Ezra prayed that the Lord would not toss them aside but instead redeem them for his purposes.

When we confess our sins, Jesus doesn't toss us aside or throw us out like trash. He is willing to forgive us and redeem us to live life on his terms and by his Spirit's power.

Are there sins you need to confess? Do so, and God will give you another opportunity to live his way.

Savior, please forgive my sins. Renew me, Lord, and free me to do your will from now on. Amen.

COMING CLEAN

"In spite of this, there is still hope for Israel."

—Ezra 10:2

From 1861-65, the United States fought a war against itself over the issue of slavery. It was a glaring stain in American history. In 2008, the U.S. House of Representatives issued an apology to African Americans, took responsibility, and admitted that slavery was wrong. In 2009, the U.S. Senate issued a similar apology.

Healing doesn't begin until people who have done wrong take responsibility for their actions. The people of God wanted to be healed of their rebellion of intermarrying with other peoples and adopting their gods and detestable practices. Ezra prayed for God's forgiveness, and the people needed to do their part in the reconciliation process.

The people gathered around and wept. They admitted they had rejected God's command

to remain holy. They confessed their sin to Ezra and to God.

In the pouring rain, Ezra demanded that the Israelites get right with God. They took measures to confess their sins, separate from the foreign families and practices, and submit to doing God's will. This was not without great pain. Families were ripped apart. But at this time in Israel's history it was the way to make things right.

When we come clean, God forgives us. And confession must be followed by action. When we turn back to doing God's will, our witness becomes credible and our spirits begin to sing again.

Lord, I confess my sin, and I want to live according to your will. Please help me live faithfully for you. In Jesus, Amen.

A PRAYER FOR RENEWAL

For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. . . . I was cupbearer to the king. —Nehemiah 1:4, 11

During the rest of this month we will study the book of Nehemiah, who became a community developer for God in Jerusalem. Before that, however, Nehemiah served as “cupbearer to the king” in Susa, one of the capital cities of Persia. He had to sample the king’s wine (and other foods) to protect the king from being poisoned by enemies.

When some of Nehemiah’s people (the Jews) came to report about the troubles in Jerusalem, God called Nehemiah to a new job.

Nehemiah was an organizer. He knew how to pull teams together. He was knowledgeable about woods, metals, and surveying. But he didn’t begin by raising money or gathering workers; his work began with prayer. “LORD, the God of heaven . . . let your ear be

attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying.” Nehemiah realized his plans would be futile if the Lord wasn’t at the center of them from the start.

In the New Testament, Jesus spent hours in prayer before choosing his disciples. He spent much time with the Father before going to the cross. He taught his disciples how to pray. The renewing work of God begins on our knees—not with a tape measure or a smart phone.

Is the Lord asking you to come to him in prayer before you begin work today? Renewal starts on our knees.

Father, forgive me for trying to run my life without consulting you. Renew my mind and heart to serve you, as Jesus did. Amen.

LET'S REBUILD

"Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem."

—Nehemiah 2:17

As the king's cupbearer, Nehemiah had a relationship with Artaxerxes that was built on trust. Nehemiah sensed that the Lord had called him to help his people. So he asked the king for permission to rebuild the ruins of Jerusalem. Then, with help from the king and building resources provided, he set out to do this God-honoring work.

Now, when we have determined, through discernment and prayer, to do the will of God, we can expect opposition. That soon happened to Nehemiah. Sanballat and Tobiah wanted to stop the rebuilding project. "They were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites."

Notice that God doesn't "wave a magic wand" to relieve the struggle. He just keeps working through kings, people, and

circumstances. And Nehemiah trusts God to bring success. Despite the opposition, he knows the Lord is with him.

The Lord Jesus has called you and I to rebuild the broken places of our world. We can expect that our work will face trials and setbacks from people opposed to God's plans. But be assured that the Holy Spirit is working on our behalf. "He who began a good work in [us] will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). God is working through us. Let us rebuild the broken walls of society and bring glory to Jesus' name.

Lord, you have given us good work to do. Help us do our best, and sustain us when trouble comes, we pray. Amen.

SERVING TOGETHER

Next to him . . . and next to him

—Nehemiah 3:4

There are many names in Nehemiah 3. It's hard to pronounce Eliashib, Hassenaah, Meremoth, and so on. To most of us, these are just names. But to Nehemiah, they were real people, with families and stories. The people who worked on the gates and walls mattered to God, and God mattered to them. They worked, prayed, worshiped, laughed, and cried next to each other.

The words "next to" are crucial. God takes seriously our capacity to serve together as a community in doing his work.

Nobody worked alone, trying to control the project. The repairs were made by people working side by side. Their love and care for each other must have caught the eye of people watching them. Their diversity worked in unity. That's community development at its best.

The apostle Paul knew the story of Nehemiah well. He wrote to explain to a newly formed group of Jesus followers, "A body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body" (1 Corinthians 12:12). When we work together to combat hunger, we are the body of Christ. When we join hands and pray for wars to end and peace to reign on earth, we show the unity of Christ. When we serve next to each other in a spirit of unity and grace, Jesus becomes contagious and winsome. It's the church's message that Christ is real in us.

Jesus, give me the fruit of the Spirit so that self-control, patience, and goodness are evident in my life. I want to serve with other Christians in the community where you have placed me. Amen.

THE GIFT OF TENSION

“Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome...”

—Nehemiah 4:14

Israel’s opponents mounted a fierce campaign against them. Sanballat and his friends tried to bully God’s people to stop the work of rebuilding. They ridiculed the people and threatened violence. And the people reacted in a very normal way. Their emotional strength began to falter. Tension began to rise as exhaustion set in and the fear of attack surfaced. How would Nehemiah handle this situation?

With their enemies breathing down their necks, Nehemiah encouraged the people to keep up the work. He prayed for God’s protection. With hands lifted to heaven, he prayed, “Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads.” In addition to prayer, he stationed people as guards. If an attack was evident, they were ready to fight. Nehemiah’s words

and wisdom provided solace and strength to the people. He spoke into the tension by saying, “Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.”

Tension is a gift if we seize it as an opportunity to strengthen our faith in the Lord, who is strong and mighty. Jesus never ran away from tension. He embraced it as a gift that can be used to become courageous in the midst of fear. We don’t seek out tension, but it may be a gift we really need.

Lord, give me confidence and courage to put my trust in you and do the work you have for me. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

MAKING IT RIGHT

“What you are doing is not right. Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God . . . ?”
—Nehemiah 5:9

In our verses today we find that people were struggling to make ends meet and that many of their fellow Jews were taking advantage of them. So Nehemiah had to address this matter of injustice with grace and firmness.

First, he took seriously the cries of injustice. Rich nobles and officials were mistreating many of their poorer brothers and sisters, charging interest on debts and even selling their children into slavery for payment. Nehemiah heard their cries for justice.

Second, Nehemiah took action. Justice must be addressed with appropriate remedies. Nehemiah got into the faces of the nobles and officials and pointed out that they were not acting in a God-fearing manner. Nehemiah told them to give back the fields and houses—and the interest they had charged.

The rich nobles and officials took Nehemiah’s words to heart. They took action. They gave back what had been taken from the poor people who cried out.

Justice is an important value to God. Jesus came to bring justice into the world, and he calls us to follow his example. We are to work toward justice where it is in short supply. We must venture into the cracks and crevices of injustice and make things right!

Lord, guide me not to ignore injustices in my neighborhood, city, nation, and world. Help me to pray and work to bring justice in places where I have a voice and influence. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

BE ALERT

He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me.
—Nehemiah 6:13

In school, a friend tried to convince me to do something wrong against a person he did not like. I refused. So he asked someone else, who agreed to his shady suggestion.

Some people will go to great lengths to discredit or tarnish another person's reputation. How can a person stay alert to such schemes?

Nehemiah knew when people were trying to trick him. His enemies tried again and again to stop the work of rebuilding God's city. They even sent Nehemiah a false message about a rumor of revolt against the king, hoping he would fall for it. But Nehemiah was aware of their plot and wouldn't take the bait. So the enemies tried a different tactic. They hired a prophet to try to trick him. But he prayed that the Lord would strengthen his hands and

sharpen his mind, and he was able to resist. He said, "I realized that God had not sent [this prophet], but that . . . he had been hired to intimidate me."

Jesus taught his disciples that he would be sending them out like sheep among wolves. He warned them to be "as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves"; he said, "Be on your guard" (Matthew 10:16-17). We also are called to be on high alert with people who wish to deter us from keeping our focus on serving God.

Jesus, protect us from playing into schemes of the devil and those who would harm us. Keep our hearts and minds on guard against temptations and tricks. May we please you alone. Amen.

ARE WE DONE YET?

The wall was completed . . . in fifty-two days.

—Nehemiah 6:15

It's a great feeling to finish a long and difficult project.

Imagine how it felt for Nehemiah and the Jews to have completed their building project. They had worked under threats of attack and delays, under a cloud of tension day and night. Finally, after fifty-two days of nearly constant work, the wall of Jerusalem was finished. Time to celebrate? Not quite. Tensions with their enemies continued.

Nehemiah knew that opposition would not stop just because the work was finished. When the final touches around the doors and gates were complete, Israel's enemies "were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of [Israel's] God." As a result, threats from their enemies kept coming. The people had to

remember why they began the rebuilding in the first place—God had called them to be his people and to be a light for the other nations. Their enemies could not defeat God, but they would surely keep trying.

Has a dear friend wounded you with unkind words? Do your enemies constantly try to run you into the ground? God has called you and will always be with you. Even if people are not celebrating God's work in your life, you have a Savior who is always for you, not against you. You can trust him.

Jesus, help me to see that you always keep working in my life. Help me to trust that I am always your servant and child. In your name, Amen.

INTEGRITY

Hananiah . . . was a man of integrity and feared God more than most people do.
—Nehemiah 7:2

The news media churn out stories on all kinds of people doing bad things. Politicians are accused of taking bribes and hiring prostitutes. Priests are suspected of abusing children. Are there any people of integrity any more? What does a person of integrity look like?

Nehemiah knew some people that he could trust to do the right thing. He had observed Hananiah, for example, in his work as commander of the citadel. Nehemiah had seen Hananiah's spiritual life in action, giving evidence of godly, discerning leadership and a heart willing to serve the Lord. Hananiah "feared God more than most people do."

In other words, his everyday life showed great respect for God as his King. He accepted that he was small and God was sovereign over his life.

That's what integrity looks like.

Jesus is our model of integrity. His life matched his character and being. Maybe that's why people flocked to him; he was different from the teachers of the law and other religious leaders. Jesus was who he was, inside and out. Integrity, for Jesus, was to show what God was like—truth and grace wrapped into a human package.

Jesus wants us to be people of integrity. Does your inner life of patience, goodness, and self-control flow outward into deeds and words that bless others? Ask Jesus to fill your life with his holy character.

Dear Jesus, give me a heart and mind that truly follow your will and way. In your name, Amen.

THE LIST

God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials and the common people for registration by families.

—Nehemiah 7:5

I only look at my checkbook to make sure there's enough money to write a check. When I follow a recipe, I don't accurately measure the ingredients. I just toss everything into a bowl.

I am not wired for accuracy. But God is a God of accuracy. Nehemiah made a big deal about names and numbers. As the exiled people of God transformed from an unsettled people to a restored people, names and numbers were important. God cared about every family and each person's life.

There were lives and stories behind every name and number. No one is invisible in God's family. The priests mattered because they helped with and conducted worship for the people. The singers, gatekeepers, and temple servants assisted the priests and Levites. In order to fill the city of God with right

living and worship, Nehemiah needed to get the rules and numbers right. God cares deeply about every detail of his salvation plan.

Jesus cared about getting the details of salvation right. He healed a blind man and told him to go visit the local priest. He cleared the temple from being a place of commercial business that crowded out prayer. He submitted himself to death on a cross because it was the only way to redeem sinful humankind.

How about you? Next time you cut corners in your walk with God, think about the details, because they matter to him.

Jesus, thank you for fulfilling every detail of salvation to redeem us from sin and death. Help us live faithfully for you. Amen.

TELL THE STORY

[Israel] stood . . . and confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors.
—Nehemiah 9:2

Eugene Peterson writes in his book *Answering God*, “God works with words. He uses them to make a story of salvation. He pulls us into the story. When we believe, we become willing participants in the plot. . . . We can do this recklessly or robustly, throwing ourselves into relationships and actions. When we do this, we pray.”

Israel got pulled into the story of reconciliation by confessing their sins through prayer. But they had to prepare themselves to enter God’s arena.

First, Israel prepared an atmosphere of reconciliation. They gathered before the Lord, knowing that they and their ancestors had all blown it. Then they fasted, pushing out sinful desires and creating space for God. Next they remembered their holy identity and separated themselves from the

practices of other nations. And they told God their story of sins through prayer. There was a cycle of reading the Law, confessing their sins, and worship.

In their prayers, they gave honor and praise to God alone. They remembered that salvation was God’s idea, not theirs. Their prayers returned them to the story of God, who kept his promise to make something out of them despite their sins.

Jesus is God’s idea too. We are invited into a story we did not write. Jesus wrote us into the book of life by his great love for us, ushering us into the big story of God’s mercy and grace. That’s the story you and I get to tell!

Savior, you are the best story I can ever tell someone. Through it, may my neighbors see you. Amen.

THE CHOICE

"They . . . were well-nourished; they reveled in your great goodness. But they were disobedient and rebelled against you; they turned their backs on your law."
—Nehemiah 9:25-26

God chose to make Israel his vehicle of love. He wanted them to be a light to the nations. In today's verses, Israel recalls God's actions with their ancestors. God "gave them kingdoms and nations." He "made their children as numerous as the stars in the sky." He chose them for the purpose of revealing his faithfulness and love for them and of blessing the nations through them.

As Israel prepared to begin a new journey with the God who had chosen them, they confessed that they had made unwise choices. Success had not made Israel choose to love God more; it tempted them to do whatever they wanted. God gave them salvation, but they worshiped other gods. Nehemiah wrote, "As soon as they were at rest, they again did what was evil in your sight."

Israel chose to live their lives on their own terms rather than the Lord's.

Today you and I will make choices that can lead toward big decisions to either follow the Lord or not. You will choose to increase either your kingdom or God's. You will choose to do your will or the Lord's. You will choose to love or hate your neighbor. The biggest choice made in our life was that God first chose us to be his. Now, how will you respond?

Righteous Lord, I regret choices I have made in the past. Forgive me in the name of Jesus, your Son. Help me to make choices that please you and allow your kingdom to come. Amen.

RENEWING VOWS

"We are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it."
—Nehemiah 9:38

One of the touching moments in a marriage ceremony is when the bride and groom face one another to speak their vows. When I officiate at a wedding ceremony, I ask the couple to repeat words of fidelity, trust, and commitment. I've witnessed grooms saying vows with tears streaming down their cheeks. I've seen brides sniffing under their veils as they hear those words.

Vows are solemn promises. God promised Abraham that he would be his God. Abraham's children grew into the nation of Israel. Now Nehemiah and Israel were renewing their vows to the Lord. They recommitted to God, who was already committed to them.

Along with their leaders, Israel stood before their commitment-keeping God and repeated their vows to be his people.

They promised many things to their covenant God. Above all, they promised to love the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Over 2,000 years ago, God renewed his vows to us by sending his Son. Jesus prayed, "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word" (John 17:6). In this way Jesus repeated God's vows to us, saying we belong to him alone. Let's live out our love for him today!

Lord, I renew my vows of love and commitment to you alone. I promise to serve and worship you because you first loved me. In your name, Amen.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

The people commended all who volunteered to live in Jerusalem.

—Nehemiah 11:2

What do Carmel, Indiana; McKinney, Texas; and Eden Prairie, Minnesota, have in common? They were *Forbes* magazine's top choices for the best places to live in 2012. They were picked because of low crime, great schools, and strong economies.

For the Jews, Jerusalem was the best place to live. There was no better location for a formerly exiled people to rebuild their lives than to take up residence near the house of God.

Only one family out of ten could live in Jerusalem. The goal was to live, work, and worship God's way. Each of the family lines populated Jerusalem with the kind of people who centered everything on being God's witnesses to the surrounding nations.

To live in Jerusalem was a great honor, but also a challenge.

The people chosen were honored to lead the kind of life that brought glory to the Lord. They would treat each other with justice. They would regularly engage in sincere worship. But it would be a challenge to be faithful and not cut corners in work and worship. Still, Jerusalem's residents accepted the honor and challenge to make God's city the best place to live.

How do we attract people for God? We must take to heart Paul's words: "Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). The best place to live is in the will of our only Savior.

Jesus, may I live in such a way that others will see you at work in me and give you the glory. Amen.

CALL AND RESPONSE

The leaders of the Levites . . . and their associates . . . stood opposite them to give praise and thanksgiving, one section responding to the other.
—Nehemiah 12:24

I grew up in the African American church, and we often sang songs that used a call-and-response style. Different musicians used two different choruses, creating a musical conversation between them.

Nehemiah shows us a picture of call-and-response singing among the Israelites. Today's chapter contains a long list of priests and Levites. The priests helped the people bridge their relationship with God. The Levites were the worship leaders in the temple. These groups instructed the people to worship God in spirit and in truth.

Imagine these groups standing across from one another. There were no songbooks, no iTunes to download. They sang the psalms of David from memory back and forth to each other, their music an offering to God. They praised him for bringing

them to Jerusalem by his power alone. They shouted praise songs of thanksgiving that outdid any vocal concert we would hear today. The worship of the one true God was exactly what Israel was created to do.

We were made to worship. Worship pulls us into the large and spacious world of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Worship goes on in heaven continuously, honoring the Lamb who was slain for our salvation. Let's join the heavenly choir by singing praise and thanksgiving to the Lord. Make a joyful sound to the Lord!

"I will sing of my Redeemer and his wondrous love to me." I will join in singing praise and thanksgiving to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

JOIN THE PARADE OF PRAISE

They offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. . . . The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.
—Nehemiah 12:43

I attended a college football game in Ann Arbor, Michigan, to see my favorite college team play against the University of Michigan. My team was losing badly, so I left before the game ended. As I walked to my car, I could hear the loud cheers of the fans of the winning team.

The big event in Jerusalem was the dedication of the completed wall. It was time to celebrate and let all the nations know who was responsible. Nehemiah split the many singers and musicians into two groups—like two great marching bands. One choir, with cymbals and other instruments, paraded “up the steps of the City of David. . . . The second choir proceeded in the opposite direction.” Nehemiah followed with a proud heart and glad spirit. Once the two choirs met up at the house of God, the people erupted in joyful praise that could be heard

for miles around. Every person joined in the praise parade. God was worthy of their praise, and nothing could stop them.

Each day we have the opportunity to join the gospel parade and sing our praise to God. Let your praise of Jesus echo through your heart to your voice. “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story . . .” (Psalm 107:1-2).

Master Jesus, I was created to praise you. I will not stand on the sidelines and just be a spectator. I will sing of your goodness to the people around me. In your name, Amen.

THE OLD FRIEND OF SIN

I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah's household goods out of the room.
—Nehemiah 13:8

A young woman came to our church door, carrying a bag of her clothes. Her face was bruised. Her voice cracked with grief. She wanted out of an abusive relationship. We helped her into a shelter, and she began attending church. Her face healed; her spirit was no longer downcast. Her life seemed to be turning around. Suddenly she disappeared. After several months she showed up again, bruised and bleeding. She had gone back to her old boyfriend. Life was too hard without him, she said, even if he was bad. Old habits are hard to break.

Nehemiah had spent much time helping Israel restore its relationship with God. He endured many sleepless nights protecting the workers. He had rallied throngs of Jews who had wanted to give up. He had tirelessly promoted God's law.

But it took only one man's friendship with an old enemy to bring corruption back in. Nehemiah would have none of it. He kicked Tobiah out of his cozy room, cleaned it from top to bottom, and returned the things of God to their rightful place there. Nehemiah's experiences in the past and his love for God's people refused to give evil a foothold again.

When old sins resurface in our lives, we can't allow them back in. We must submit to God, resisting the devil (James 4:7). We have a Savior who doesn't treat us as our sins deserve but grants us grace and power for a new start of service to him.

Jesus, sin keeps coming back into our lives. Help us to resist, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

REMEMBER

Remember me . . . my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love.
—Nehemiah 13:22

There's an old nursery rhyme about "an old woman who lived in a shoe" and who "had so many children, she didn't know what to do." I think Nehemiah might have felt like her. He had so many people to watch. When one group was doing well, another was behaving badly. He kept going to his knees and asking God to remember him.

Nehemiah was putting out fires all over Jerusalem. Each time he dealt with a new situation, he worked to make it better, and he prayed something like "Remember me for this, my God." He could not stop people from sinning, but he could bring them before the Lord in prayer. Prayer is the only solution for many of the world's problems.

By sending Jesus, who fulfilled the Old Testament law perfectly for all who believe in him, God

showed that he kept his promise to make Israel a blessing to all other nations. Believing in Jesus, we can be assured that God forgives us for Jesus' sake, crediting us with his righteousness (Romans 3). That's all we have, when we think about it. So we pray continually for his help, that in his strength we may honor God in all we do.

When we pray, we know that God controls the world, loves us, and promises to work in and through us. We trust that God will bring glory out of terrible situations, because he alone can do it. Daily, then, let's remember the one true God, who holds the whole world in his hands and saves us!

Dear Lord, we trust in you.
Have your way in us, for
Jesus' sake. Amen.

this month

Strangers and Pilgrims on the Journey

Jason Zuidema

Scripture testifies that the Christian life is like a pilgrimage. This month we will explore the world of travelers, pilgrims, and those who are on their way home. We will use a number of texts from the book of Hebrews and other Scriptures to help in our exploration. Our goal is to better understand not only why the Bible uses this fitting image but also how it reveals the gospel, the good news of the kingdom of Jesus Christ!

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STRANGERS

By faith [Abraham] made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. —Hebrews 11:9

When I was a student, I spent a year in Paris, France. The rich culture and beautiful architecture made the experience unforgettable. However, this was also my first experience in a foreign country with a different language and customs. I quickly learned that adapting to life in a new setting is not always a delightful adventure.

During my first week I was frustrated because I couldn't find milk at the local supermarket. I later realized it was packaged differently and located far from where I expected it to be. Looking back, I chuckle at my frustration. But the deeper truth was the realization of how different I was from everyone around me: *I was a stranger.*

In a few weeks, I found it easier to adapt to my surroundings. But today, after years of working with traveling workers and

immigrants, I know it can take a long time for fears and stress to subside.

People who cross borders are not the only strangers in this world, though. All believers in Christ are strangers or sojourners here, moving toward a destination beyond this world. While we are created to live here and care about the creation God has given us, we can also engage in and enjoy the adventure of discovering God's kingdom and all that he has in store for us.

Lord, stretch us to grow and keep discovering the wonders of your kingdom while you call us to live for you in this world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

PILGRIMS TO THE FATHER'S HOUSE

"My Father's house has many rooms . . . I am going there to prepare a place for you."
—John 14:2

My grandfather, an immigrant from post-World War II Europe, prayed pretty much the same prayer every morning at breakfast. He prayed that we might be "pilgrims to the Father-house with many mansions" and that "we would have strength to bear." These phrases seemed strange to me as a child, but they were based on an older version of the Bible, which translated today's text as "In my Father's house are many mansions. . . ."

These verses are meant to provide great comfort for us. Jesus tells us that his Father has prepared a place for us: we are expected guests. Though the older translation might make us think of grandiose buildings, we should not minimize the reality Jesus is promising to us. The "rooms," or "living spaces," are being prepared by God himself.

It seems clear also that Jesus is not simply talking about a dwelling that is being built for us sometime in the future. He speaks of going there, after his death and resurrection, to prepare a place for us.

This means that today we can have the joy of knowing that our living space is already prepared, even though we are still on the Christian pilgrim journey in this world. That gives us all the more reason to pray that God will make us joyful and faithful pilgrims!

Lord in heaven, thank you for preparing a place for us. We pray that we might be faithful pilgrims, never forgetting that you watch over our path. In Christ's name, Amen.

ROAMERS AND PILGRIMS

The LORD said, “. . . Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse. . . . You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.”
—Genesis 4:10-12

Many of us think we are far busier today than people were in ages past. Alternating between the breakneck speed of life in the fast lane and the slog of gridlock, our lives in the modern world rarely give us time to think about where we are going.

But the hectic nature of life in our time can be deceiving. With so much activity, we might think that we are going somewhere, that life is heading in the right direction. Yet, for all its busyness, so many people in our world feel profoundly empty and lost.

The result of Cain’s act of murder can help us understand our situation. After killing his brother, he was cursed. In particular, the consequence of the curse was that he would be a “restless wanderer.” He would not have a place that he could

truly call home. By opposing God, he was on the go, but with nowhere to go.

This image describes the results of sin in our broken world. Without God’s Word as a light for our path, we do not know where to go. Without Jesus, we too are restless wanderers.

Perhaps the 4th-century theologian Augustine said it best: “O Lord . . . our heart is restless until it rests in you.”

Lord God, we confess that our hearts by themselves desire to wander. Thank you for giving us Jesus Christ, who is the way and the truth and the life. We pray in his name. Amen.

RUN!

Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us . . . run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

—Hebrews 12:1

Our physical bodies need daily exercise and activity. If we rarely stretch, exercise, do physical work, or play sports, our bodies will grow inflexible and heavy. In the long run we will risk all sorts of health problems. By midlife we will feel the aches and pains of old age prematurely.

Though we don't often think of our spiritual life in the same way, we need to work at being spiritually fit as well. We need to exercise our souls and do faith-building exercises.

These are not exercises we do by our own strength, however. Through Jesus Christ, God has given us a "new nature" that needs to grow up and become strong. The apostle Paul explains that Christians together are like a body that needs to be attached to Christ as their Head, and "the whole body,

supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow" (Colossians 2:19).

As we grow in Christ, we need to exercise all the muscles of our faith. As our text tells us, we must "run with perseverance the race marked out for us." We are called not to shuffle or trudge along in our spiritual life, but to press on, with exertion, for God's glory.

Creator God, thank you that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. Help us not only to be physically fit but also to be active in your kingdom work so that we may bring you glory and honor. In Jesus' name, Amen.

FIXING OUR EYES ON JESUS

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

—Hebrews 12:1-2

Here's a fun learning game to play with children: tell them to walk in as straight a line as possible toward a tree or fencepost across the yard while concentrating only on their feet. The results are both entertaining and instructive. As we might guess, looking only at our feet will make us veer off course. The best way to go straight toward something is to keep looking at it as we go.

The writer of Hebrews knew this is true also for the Christian life: we should not get tangled in the work of putting one foot in front of the other. Instead we should focus on the destination: Jesus Christ. We must run the race marked out for us—but with our eyes fixed on the finish line.

The writer also adds more good news: we are not running on our own strength; we are run-

ning in the strength of Jesus Christ.

Christ is the root of our faithful run, and he is also the one who brings it to completion. We can take comfort in knowing that he has already run the race ahead of us. And he continues to provide all the spiritual blessings we need during the ups and downs, the joys and challenges of this earthly life.

As you run the race of faithful living, are you focusing steadily on Jesus, who ran the course already and helps you along the way?

Lord, teach us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. Forgive us when we try to do things on our own. May we be led by your Spirit in all we do. Amen.

COUNTING OUR DAYS

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

—Psalm 90:12

Arriving in a foreign country without knowing your precise destination is complicated. In a time before the Internet was available everywhere, I once arrived in a large foreign city after losing the directions to my hotel. I asked a number of people for help in finding my way, but without the exact name of the hotel or street, they were unable to guide me. So for a few long hours I experienced the feeling of being truly lost.

Often in life we think we are heading in the general direction of our goal, but still we end up lost. Though we might start out well, we can quickly lose interest in seriously considering the next actions we must take.

In order not to lose track of where we are going and why we are going there, the psalmist encourages us to “number our days.” The writer is not talking

about simple math—counting the number of days that we might potentially live. No one knows that but God himself. Rather, the psalmist wants us to realize that nothing in this life except living for God should be our ultimate goal, or the ultimate treasure we have in mind. Money, fame, possessions—none of that will last. As a popular saying goes, “When you die, you can’t take it with you.”

When we number each day with God as our main focus and guide, we gain wisdom for this life and the life to come.

Almighty God, you are the source of all life. We know that each day of our lives is a gift from your hand. Help us live each day in the light of your Word. Amen.

A HEAVENLY CITY

They were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

—Hebrews 11:16

After a long, tiring day of travel, nothing is better than arriving at a destination where a meal and bed are prepared. Knowing the day's journey is behind you makes the food taste better and the bed more comfortable. When you're not sure where you will eat or sleep, the journey is more stressful.

The writer of Hebrews describes several Old Testament believers who were living and walking by faith. They really didn't know where they were headed. They could have gone back to their original country. But instead they were looking ahead to a much better place, one that they knew God was preparing for them.

Christians—who long for the kingdom of God—can also be encouraged that God will take care of them and has prepared a place for them. The image

here is not that of a tent or a hotel room, but something permanent—a home that will include everything a believer needs.

The images Scripture uses to describe this home as “a country of their own” and “a city for them” can inspire our imaginations, but we do not yet have all the answers about what this home will look like. But we do know it will be a place of rest and joy. How could it not be? The God of the universe is preparing it for us!

King of Heaven, we long to visit your beautiful city. Thank you for preparing a place for us. Send your Spirit to give us joy and peace for the remainder of our pilgrimage. Amen.

EZRA AND GOD'S GOOD LAW

With the wisdom of your God . . . appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice . . . —all who know the laws of your God. And you are to teach any who do not know them. —Ezra 7:25

Ezra had the privilege of leading some of his people back from exile in the land of Babylon. But going back to Jerusalem was not just about reclaiming the land. It was also about reclaiming the law God had given to his people Israel. Ezra was to set up leaders and judges to administer the law of God. The people's return from exile would not be complete until they rededicated themselves to living for God.

Ezra's story is one of many in a series of journeys, exiles, and returns in the Old Testament. For the people of Israel, these events often resulted from varying levels of commitment to God's law.

We also might feel the tug of exile and return in our life. With so many changes going on in this world, we may wonder where God is leading us.

Through it all, God's call to live for him remains constant.

The stories of God's people show us that even if we love God and know his instructions, we will still fail to keep God's law. Yet we ought not despair. Jesus himself has made us right with God. Our response is to follow God's good law: to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves (see Matthew 22:37-39). And we can trust God to lead us.

Divine Judge, we confess that we have not always lived according to your law. Please do not judge us by our actions, but by Christ's perfect sacrifice. In his name alone we pray. Amen.

JACOB IN EGYPT

"The years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty. My years have been few and difficult, and they do not equal the years of the pilgrimage of my fathers."
—Genesis 47:9-10

Sometimes the hardships of life accumulate on the soul, with resulting bitterness and resentment. When we cannot forgive and move on, we develop soul-destroying grudges. As one writer noted: "Holding a grudge is like drinking poison and then hoping that the other person dies." The deep desire to see someone suffer ends up as a curse over our own heads.

Jacob had lots of reasons to hold a grudge: his days had been difficult, especially with a recent drought in the land. He might have despaired, letting the bitter bile of resentment gouge his heart. But we find his perspective was quite different.

He framed the "few and difficult" years of his life in the context of a pilgrimage. He knew that life was not just an accumulation of one problem after

another but was a journey directed by God himself.

This pilgrim perspective was all the more useful for a man who left his homeland to live in a foreign land, where there was no guarantee of peace.

As Jacob found peace in the prism of life as a pilgrimage, so can we. Whether we move about or stay in one place, God is shaping us, sharpening us, calling us to live for him. Life has its challenges and trials, but we find comfort in the love and care of our heavenly Father.

Great Comforter, my life is often difficult. I need your support and power. Please send your Spirit so that I don't become resentful. Help me to be grateful for your blessings. Amen.

OUT OF EGYPT

Caleb . . . said, "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it." But the men who had gone up with him said, "We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are."
—Numbers 13:30-31

One of the great pilgrimages of Scripture is the trek of the people of Israel from Egypt, where they had been slaves, to the promised land of Canaan. It's an account of great adventure but also great tragedy. After seeing how God rescued them through amazing miracles, how could the people not trust the Lord Almighty as they stood at the door to the promised land?

Yet, amazingly, that is what happened. After witnessing the great works of the Lord in their escape from Egypt—the ten plagues, the walk through the Red Sea on dry land, the destruction of Pharaoh's army (Exodus 7-15)—the people of Israel showed a great lack of confidence in God when they reached the land of promise. Rather than having confidence that the Lord would again do as

he had promised, they rejected the advice of Caleb and Joshua, who trusted the Lord. So the people paid a heavy price. Their desert wanderings for the next forty years were a testimony to their lack of faith in God.

In our own lives, God often provides abundantly for us also—and yet, when we're faced with a challenge, we fail to trust that he will bring us through.

The Lord has promised our salvation. Let's hold firm to his promises!

Lord of history, the past, present, and future are in your hands. You know all things and work in all things for good. Lead us by your promises. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOU ARE GOING?

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

—Hebrews 11:8

With experience, traveling gets easier. If we have previously navigated an airport or are familiar with the local language, it's not overwhelming to get where we are going. But if we don't know the way to our next gate or can't read the signs pointing the way, we can soon feel lost and have no idea where we are and where we need to go next.

Abraham was in a situation like that. If we try to put ourselves in his sandals, we can see that it was no small thing to obey and follow God's leading. God promised that Abraham would be a great nation and bring great blessings for "all peoples on earth," but this would require a long journey and a new start, living among strangers in a faraway land. "He did not know where he was going."

When Abraham arrived at his destination, he built an altar and dedicated it to the Lord, who had brought him there. What a wonderful action in the midst of one of the most memorable pilgrimages in Scripture.

Where has God brought you? Is your first thought to worship him for his faithfulness? God continues to promise us spiritual blessings in this life and the next. So let's not forget to dedicate the steps of our lives to God, even if, like Abraham, it is unclear exactly where God is leading.

True God, I dedicate my life to you. Nothing that I have is mine alone; it all belongs to you. Use me and mold me after your will, I pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.

RUNNING FOR YOUR LIFE

Elijah was afraid and ran for his life.

—1 Kings 19:3

More people run for their lives every day in our time than ever before. In the news every day we can find harrowing stories of flight from famine, disease, or war. This is especially true of people fleeing persecution because of race or religion. For example, there are pockets of Christians in many countries of the world who live in daily fear of capture. They know they might have to flee from their homes if the authorities become too interested in their meetings.

One day, Elijah learned that had to “run for his life.” The wicked queen Jezebel wanted to kill him. He was so full of fear that he prayed for his life to end. He had tried to bring the people back to God, but, in his mind, Elijah had failed. He thought he was the only one left who truly believed in God.

But God reassured him. God revealed his magnificent power and also his compassionate tenderness. The Lord showed Elijah that the world could not stand against his divine will.

Elijah learned that was not alone: more than seven thousand others in Israel had not bowed down to Jezebel’s god.

Elijah found that he did not have to run in fear—he could walk forward in faith.

Elijah’s God is also with us today. We are not alone. We need not fear, for he is in control.

Dear Lord, sometimes I fear that the forces of evil are overwhelming. I know that help is found only in your name. So I call to you for help in facing the challenges of my life. Amen.

WINGS FOR TIMES OF TROUBLE

"Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest."
—Psalm 55:6

God knows that the journey of life is not always easy. His Word is full of stories and laments of people who suffered pain and sorrow.

This psalm speaks honestly about the challenges of life. How often must we also deal with struggles? How often do we feel powerless when faced with situations that seem to have no happy result? How often do we wish to turn to someone who can help us in a situation that seems impossible to resolve? Or, as our verse implies, how often do we just want to fly away?

The psalms speak to all the emotions of the believer's heart. These are not always happy emotions: people who follow Christ still feel the pressures of life in this world. In fact, the psalms help us honestly express our faith. We can pray the psalms, recite

the psalms, and sing the psalms. We can cry out to God, using their words. They offer a voice of praise, but also of lament. The Bible, God's Word to us, is versatile for any occasion.

As pilgrims, we will experience both highs and lows in our lives. The psalms can give us the vocabulary necessary to speak to God in every situation. Our heavenly Father wants to hear from us always, even at our worst. He's big enough to hear anything we have to say.

Have you "cast your cares on the LORD" today? "He will sustain you."

Lord, you give your Word and Spirit to lead and comfort us. Fill me again today so that I can live faithfully. I can live only by your blessing. Amen.

DAYS LIKE A SHADOW

"We are foreigners and strangers in your sight, as were all our ancestors. Our days on earth are like a shadow, without hope."

—1 Chronicles 29:15

Since I am a father of young children, many men remind me to spend time with my kids while I still can. Most of those who give this advice are older fathers who regret not having done more with their children. But then many parents also say they can't believe how fast their children have grown. It seems that one day they are babies, and the next day they are teenagers.

This is one example of something we all face as we grow older: *Time flies*. When you are young, life seems to stretch out a long way ahead of you, but with every passing day you realize just how short life is.

David realized this before he handed the kingdom over to his son Solomon. Through a long and intense life, David realized the end would come all too soon. If we think that the meaning of life is in the

length of its days, we come up empty-handed: we hold on to shadows; we have no real hope.

Yet David's final note was one of praise. Though life was short, he knew what was important as he led his people in worship.

May our time on this earth also be filled from beginning to end with praise for the Creator who gives it meaning.

Father God, the days of our lives are brief. Please send your Spirit to guide us so that we do not stumble or fall. Forgive us when we seek our own kingdoms instead of yours. May we instead honor your glorious name. Amen.

GOD IS PRESENT EVERYWHERE

"Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

—Matthew 28:20

Having a travel companion often makes travel more exciting. The great sights and sounds of the world are impressive when seen alone, but when we are able to share them with someone else, we savor them even more. Even the pictures we take while traveling alone become more meaningful when we share them with loved ones.

The same is true on our Christian journey. Though some people have walked the pilgrim path relatively alone, we are meant to walk it with others. God's people are not lone rangers in the life of faith. We are brothers and sisters connected in Christ's body by the closest of bonds.

We are tied together with Christ. More than anyone else, he is our travel companion. Though Jesus went physically to heaven, he is present with us

through his Spirit wherever we are, wherever we go, with every step we take.

But he is not just an observer. Christ provides for us: he has promised to give us everything we need to make it to the end. He binds us with his body, the church, and he fills us with his Spirit. He is with us to bring true comfort and real enjoyment in all the thrilling episodes of life's journey. As our Lord promised his disciples before he ascended into heaven, he is with us always.

Lord of the universe, help me to see that you are present with me today. I need you to protect me in all I do so that I will bring glory to you. May your Spirit fill me and strengthen me to serve you. Amen.

GOD'S WORD AND PASSING AWAY

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away."
—Matthew 24:35

I love to play ice hockey. This past season, after a few months of weekly games, I was beginning to feel quite comfortable with my expertise and level of play. But then one afternoon, as I went out on the ice, I noticed a bunch of new players. It soon became clear that they were much more skillful than I was. Compared to the earlier group, I was acceptable, but with these players I felt like a beginner.

Comparisons on our spiritual journey can sometimes be misleading. Often we compare ourselves to the people around us and feel more-or-less on the same level with them. So we think we must be OK in God's eyes. But we may well do better to view ourselves in light of God's word. It tells us that Christ has already fully paid for all our sin. And it calls us to a high standard of loving God with everything we have.

In today's verse, Jesus speaks from a kingdom perspective that goes far beyond the physical and spiritual worlds we know about. From a worldly point of view, the words of Jesus seem as nothing compared to the vast size of the universe. Yet Jesus says that his words "will never pass away," while everything else will pass away.

As you journey through life, are you comparing your life to the things of this world or the words of Jesus? Only he has the words of eternal life, and they will never pass away.

Lord, as I continue on life's journey, I realize I can go nowhere without you by my side. Please be my travel companion as I journey today. Amen.

WHO IS LEADING US?

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

—Psalm 119:105

My brother works in the world of underground mining. Several years ago, we visited the mine where he worked and rode an elevator down into the earth where rocks had been blasted away to make a tunnel. While we were down there, the attendant shut off all the lights. He warned us he would be doing this, but the effect was shocking nonetheless. The darkness was total: my eyes were wide open, but I couldn't even see my hands in front of my face.

Scripture speaks of the twisted effects of sin as total darkness. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that without God's grace we are blind: "If your eyes are unhealthy [sinful], your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness" (Matthew 6:23). We might have our eyes open

to the things of the world, but we grope around trying to find real meaning or something that satisfies our hearts.

It is not without reason that Christ calls himself "the light of the world" (John 8:12). A world of darkness needs his light. Indeed, as God's living Word, he is the one who gives light to our path.

If you are groping around on the path of life, not knowing which way to go, follow the leading of God's Word.

Light of the world, make my path clear today. Help me to walk with confidence and joy as a child of God. Please heal my spiritual eyes if I cannot see as I should. In your name, Amen.

BLIND GUIDES

“Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.”
—Matthew 15:14

Scripture has a lot to say about the human senses. And just as we can damage our physical senses, we also can damage our soul.

Jesus often talked about people who are spiritually blind, deaf, or lame. This was not meant to put down people who have physical disabilities. In fact, Jesus often praised those who were physically disabled but spiritually whole.

Some religious leaders in his day were physically whole but spiritually corrupted—and should have known better. In speaking against Jesus, they showed themselves to be lacking spiritual sight. They had pious, wise-sounding words but really didn't know how the kingdom of God worked.

Often we are attracted by the words of leaders who sound

wise to the world. We might even ignore the fact that their teaching goes against Scripture. But at what cost?

The apostle Paul says in 2 Timothy 4:3, “The time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.” Paul is saying that when we follow a leader just to hear what we want to hear, we will end up in a ditch. Do you have “itching ears,” or will you walk on the path of sound teaching?

God of heaven and earth,
I confess that lies are often
more attractive than truth.
Help me to listen to your
Word so that I can follow
the path of loving you.
Amen.

COMPLETELY SAFE

Jesus . . . is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

—Hebrews 7:24-25

During a hike, it can be exciting and rewarding to follow side trails that veer away from the main trail. Finding hidden parts of forests or mountains that few have seen before can be exhilarating.

But traveling in unmarked territory can sometimes be dangerous. Authorities put up boundary signs for good reasons. We should obey those signs because they are usually posted to help keep us safe. Unfortunately, we sometimes hear about people who were hurt or killed because they ignored warnings and went into places of great danger.

Warning signs also exist in our spiritual life. In particular, Scripture points us to Jesus Christ as “the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). In our reading from Hebrews today we see that through Jesus we

have access to God. He is not a temporary Savior; he continually intercedes for us—that is, he continues to mark a clear and safe trail for us in this life and into the next.

Our pilgrimage as Christians is not simply for a period in this life. It is a journey that stretches forward into the joys and exciting discoveries God has prepared for us with him in eternity.

Are you walking safely today—that is, with God?

Protector of life, I long for the day when I will be completely safe. Thank you for giving me your Spirit, who provides a foretaste of the joys of eternal life. All I do is in your hands. Amen.

JOURNEY'S END

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they . . . were foreigners and strangers on earth.
—Hebrews 11:13

I remarked recently to a friend that I realized my life could already be half (or more) over. He responded by saying he recently did a spiritual exercise with others in his church to help them focus on the top priorities in life. They decided to take time to write their own obituaries. They reasoned that if we thought about how others would remember us after we die, we could concentrate on the best priorities in life before we die.

I don't know if I am ready to write my own obituary, but I know that the exercise can be revealing. What do I want the top priorities in my life to be?

Today's verse from Hebrews is a kind of obituary. The writer says that these people "were still living by faith when they died," meaning that they remained faithful to God and trusted in

all his promises—even though the promises had not been fulfilled by the time they died. Their journey of faith in this life continued into the next, even though they did not yet see the full reality of what they believed in.

Can we say this about ourselves? God is the one who gives faith. So in his strength it really is possible to live by faith even while we are dying—and to trust that when we die, we will go on living in God's presence.

Lord, I confess that in "body and soul, in life and in death," I am "not my own, but belong" to you. Not even a hair can fall from my head without your will. What a comfort! Amen.

OUR WILL OR GOD'S?

You ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."
—James 4:15

Sooner or later we are all faced with life situations that go beyond our control. Whether it's a sickness, tension in a relationship or at work, loss of a job, or advancing age, we come to realize that we have no ability to control the outcome. We must simply be patient and, as is often said, "live one day at a time." Though we usually learn this lesson later in life, it might be helpful to learn it far earlier.

Learning that we have no control over our lives, however, may not necessarily help us. It could simply lead us to despair that nothing will ever turn out. "What's the use of even trying?" we might ask.

But James gives Christian pilgrims the way to move forward with assurance: praying that God's will be done.

Jesus taught his disciples this important principle in the Lord's Prayer, highlighting that his followers can ask that God's will be done "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). Jesus also prayed that God's will would be done through his own death for our sake. In paying for our sin, Jesus marked a path for us through death to eternal life so that we can walk with the assurance of God's presence and guidance now and always.

Are you seeking God's kingdom and walking in his will, even when you cannot control your circumstances?

All-powerful God, if my plans for this day are not in line with your will, please correct my path by your Word and Spirit. May I give glory to you today and every day. Amen.

PAUL THE TRAVELER

After I have completed this task . . . I will go to Spain and visit you on the way.
—Romans 15:28-29

We are so used to motorized travel today that it can be difficult to imagine traveling long distances on foot or on sailing ships, as Paul did. Many of us like to hike for fun, but we would not even think of walking several miles just to get to work. It would take too much time and physical energy.

In a time long before engines and electricity, the apostle Paul traveled a great deal. That must have been tiring, and it probably required lots of patience. So when we read that Paul longed to see the believers in Rome on his way to Spain, we can better understand his anticipation.

Paul's journeys were hard not only because of the distance but also because of resistance to the gospel message, the good news that Jesus is our Lord and Savior. Though groups of believers gathered to hear him, there

was often conflict with local political and religious leaders. Paul wrote about this in another letter: "I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers" (2 Corinthians 11:26). And yet Paul pushed on. His goal was nothing less than to share in "the full measure of the blessing of Christ."

In your journey, what trials have you faced? Why?

Dear Lord, thank you for prophets, apostles, and teachers who have served you faithfully. May my goal also be to share your good news with others. Amen.

ODOR OF LIFE

We are . . . the pleasing aroma of Christ. . . . To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life.

—2 Corinthians 2:15-16

Discovering other cultures is fascinating not only because of new things you see and hear, but also because of the variety of new smells. Though you might enjoy some of that from the ethnic food aisle of your grocery store, many other smells from various cultures are distinctive and rich. Even within the same region there might be dozens of ways to make a similar kind of dish—all with different blends of herbs and spices and their aromas.

Not all of the smells in a different culture may be pleasant, however. It can take some time to get used to the smells of some unfamiliar places. Worse, rotting food, animal waste, or a general lack of sanitation can make your stomach turn. And foul odors might not only be disgusting but also toxic.

Paul writes that believers who share the good news of Christ can be a kind of aroma to the people around them. For those who are ready to believe in Christ, this smell will be sweet and inviting. But for others, who think they can live any way they choose or achieve their own salvation, the aroma will be a turnoff, like the smell of death.

Let us pray that the “aroma” of our work for Jesus attracts others to come to him for the gift of eternal life.

Beautiful Savior, make my actions sweet to the senses of those around me today. Help me to reflect your beauty in a world that is full of ugly conflict and disease. In your name, Amen.

SEEDS THAT CHOKE

“The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful.” —Matthew 13:22

We might think that the greatest danger in the Christian pilgrimage is the temptation to leave the path, the way marked out for us by Christ. A more common danger, though, is not what is off the path but what is on it. We can become so preoccupied with things that are good—even spiritual blessings—that we become distracted and stop moving forward. We stop progressing toward our goal of living faithfully for our Lord and Savior.

The pilgrim life is not easy; our Lord knows that we get tired. For this reason, he feeds us and comforts us in our times of weakness. But we can easily be distracted by even these good things.

For example, think of a tired pilgrim who stops to rest under a shady tree. The pilgrim might say, “This tree is so good; I will stay here awhile. I may even

use some of it to make a shelter beside this trail. When I am ready, I will continue my journey.” Time passes, but the pilgrim never resumes his journey. Because he is so close to the path, he feels like a pilgrim, but he has fallen short of the goal.

Are you like that pilgrim? Have you settled somewhere off the path, rather than continuing on in the pilgrim life? A true disciple keeps following the Master. Up ahead, he’s calling, “Come; follow me!”

Lord and Savior, keep my eyes focused on you. If I am weary, do not let me leave the path, but strengthen me by your grace and Spirit. My only hope is in you. Amen.

VALLEY AND DARKNESS

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil,
for you are with me. . . .*
—Psalm 23:4

I am deeply troubled by people who say you can have health and wealth if only you have more faith and hope. The message sounds so enticing: who would not want to be free of sickness and have more money?

It's true that there are benefits in living the Christian life. Scientific studies have shown that people who are faithful at church and regular in prayer generally find more balance and meaning than others do in our fast-paced world.

But in my experience, some of the most faithful and deeply hopeful people I know have also been those with chronic illness and limited amounts of money. And the Bible shows that while some faithful believers were wealthy, there were many more who remained faithful without growing rich or receiving great honors. "Faith

is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1). Many faithful people do not see health and wealth in this life!

We need to keep the whole message of Scripture in view. Psalm 23 does not promise that there will be no dark valleys, but, rather, that when we are walking in dark valleys we need not fear evil, *for God is with us*. In this way God gives us real comfort to face the challenges of life.

Dear God, I have known dark valleys in my life. Thank you for being present with me in joy and pain. Please continue to show me your presence as I travel onward. Amen.

LANGUAGE

The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.
—Romans 8:26

Throughout my life I have been surrounded by multiple languages. All the major cities in the world are now full of many languages and dialects.

I have always enjoyed learning languages, but my desire far outstrips my abilities. I have learned that language is not just about a transfer of information. Language can be tied deeply to one's identity. It can bring out powerful emotions. Words can have the effect of a gentle caress or a powerful cannon blast. Language is often used to express the astounding richness of the webs of meaning in faith and life. Words put to music can make spirits soar. A slogan and the rhetoric behind it can rally a whole nation. The apostle James, therefore, urges us to be very careful with our words (see James 3:1-12).

But there are also times in our lives when words seem to fail. All the languages in the world cannot adequately express the joy of the birth of a child, the misery of a love lost, or the pain of the death of a spouse, parent, or child.

Yet we are not voiceless in such situations. The Spirit of God speaks for us in a way that captures our heart's deepest pain and desire. If you lack the words to speak, know that the Holy Spirit, our great Comforter, speaks for you and intercedes for you in line with the will of God.

Lord, sometimes I don't have words to reveal the thoughts of my heart. Holy Spirit, thank you for your care and your prayers for me. In Jesus, Amen.

TREASURE IN THIS WORLD

“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

—Matthew 6:21

When I was in high school, some college freshmen visited my school to promote their college. I don't remember what they said, but I clearly remember that they seemed much older and wiser than I was. From my perspective as a 14-year-old, these college students seemed like they had it all. Looking back now, after a few decades down the road, and knowing what I was like as a college freshman, I no longer see great wisdom!

Often in life we think of something in the future as so incredibly important—and then when we arrive at it, we see it's not as important or exciting as we had thought. Some examples might be an upcoming move, graduation from school, or a new job. Why does it so often seem that “the grass is greener on the other side of the fence”?

Jesus knows how the heart works. He knows that the heart can fixate on something, distorting its value and importance related to what we should really treasure.

The problem is that if we make anything in this world our treasure, something that defines our desires and identity, we will be left empty-handed in the end.

So what can we do? “Seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness,” the only treasure that will fulfill us in this life—and in the life to come.

Lord, help me see the right way to live. Do not let the world tell me what is special, but let me learn it from your Word. May Jesus Christ be my treasure today. Amen.

BLESSING AND STRENGTH

Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.
—Psalm 84:5

When was the last time you felt joy and longing as you set out to worship God? Psalm 84 describes a person whose “soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD” and whose heart and flesh “cry out for the living God.”

These are strong emotions. Do we need to feel that way every time we worship? Though we are not likely to approach worship in the same way every time, our relationship with God, as it grows, does draw us to desire God more and more. If we are not often eager to worship God, how can we focus our energies to enjoy, in a more profound way, meeting with our Lord in worship?

In this psalm, the writer praises the Lord for the beauty of his dwelling place. It’s a place where the psalmist can find rest, praise the Lord, be strength-

ened, and enjoy the favor and honor of God. It is a blessing to meet together with God and his people.

Though the imagery in this psalm speaks about Israel going up to Jerusalem, it can also apply to Christians today. Worship still ought to have the adventure of a pilgrimage, with the destination being the presence of God himself. When we come together, we are not just a club or a social gathering. We join to meet with the Lord Almighty.

Do you feel that way when you worship God?

Lord, thank you for your love and care. Draw me closer to you, to know you, to worship you with all my heart, by the strength of your Spirit. Amen.

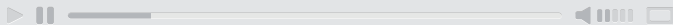
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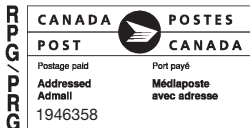
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