

July/Aug 2015

Today

refresh, refocus, renew



A SEASON WITH
THE

*Psalm*s

ALSO: MENTORING FAITH

Friends:

The greatest mentors in our lives are often our parents, grandparents, and teachers. There's no mistaking their influence in our most formative years. Yet there's much learning to be done as adults. I recall a couple of men in my church when I was a newlywed. They were at least a decade older than I was, but they befriended me. They shared their thoughts, spiritual insights, testimonies, and struggles with me. It wasn't a formal relationship, but those mentors poured their life into mine and shaped me as a young husband and father. I remain grateful for their witness.



The Scriptures are full of mentors, and in July my wife, Deb, and I explore with you how Scripture talks about mentoring and being mentored. May we all be teachable and willing to teach!

Then, in August, Thea Leunk leads us through the book of Psalms. The psalms are mentors of a sort in their own way—they lead us in praise, worship, awe, lament, and even complaint. They give voice to all aspects of the human condition in God's presence.

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

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Steven Koster".

—Steven Koster

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“Mentoring Faith”
Steven and Deb Koster



“A Season in the Psalms”
Thea Leunk

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re FRAME MEDIA

Mentoring Faith

Steven and Deb Koster

july

A *mentor* is “someone who teaches or gives help and advice to a less experienced and often younger person” (*Merriam-Webster.com*). Mentors give direction and teach; they rebuke and correct; they encourage and invest. In July we explore many mentoring relationships in the Bible and glean truths for living a faith that is contagious to others, pointing people to Christ.

Steven and Deb Koster have a passion for marriages, families, and spiritual growth in the home. Steven is director of ReFrame Media, the English-language outreach of Back to God Ministries International. Deb is a master of divinity student at Calvin Theological Seminary and the producer for Family Fire, ReFrame’s family resource at FamilyFire.com and on Facebook. The Kosters have three adult children and live in the Chicago area.

A Season in the Psalms

Thea Leunk

august

The Bible has 150 Psalms that help us speak to and about God—with praise and wonder, with sorrow and lament, with confidence and trust, with joy and thanksgiving. Whatever situations we find ourselves in, whatever we are feeling or experiencing, wherever we are on the journey of life—there is a psalm that echoes the tone of our hearts. In August we spend a season in the Psalms because all the seasons of our lives matter to God.

Thea Nyhoff Leunk serves as senior pastor at Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She has also written courses for teens and young adults on world religions, Christian faith traditions, and science and the Bible. She and her husband have three adult children.

*Note: Five of the devotional readings for August are adapted from *The Banner* (Aug. 2004) and are used by permission.*

JETHRO AND MOSES: SHARING ADVICE

*"I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. . . .
Appoint . . . officials . . . [to] serve as judges for the people
That will make your load lighter."* —Exodus 18:19-22

Jethro cared about his daughter's family. His son-in-law Moses had a big job but was burning his candle at both ends. In compassion, Jethro offered Moses advice to help him work in a healthier way: "What you are doing is not good. . . . The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone."

Jethro offered his wisdom to Moses in love. He wanted to help Moses avoid the burnout of trying to do all the leadership himself.

Moses, thankfully, had a teachable spirit. He could have ignored his father-in-law's wisdom and continued down the path toward exhaustion, but Moses chose instead to follow Jethro's advice. He could have received this as criticism of his work, but instead Moses heard it as a gift from a wise mentor.

Sometimes we become irritated when people offer unsolicited advice. "Who are they to tell me what to do?" But God calls us to care about the people around us. Sometimes caring means sharing our wisdom, and other times it means being willing to be taught. The Spirit knits the church together for our benefit and for God's glory. We can benefit from the godly wisdom of our brothers and sisters if we keep a teachable spirit.

Lord, melt our stubborn hearts so that we can receive the advice of godly mentors who seek to care for us. Give us the courage to speak your Word lovingly into the lives of the people we love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

ELIJAH AND THE WIDOW: LEARNING TO TRUST

“Don’t be afraid. . . . But first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son.”

—1 Kings 17:13

The widow of Zarephath was preparing to make her last meal. A drought had caused a severe famine, and she was out of food. Unable to feed her family, she was not looking to give the prophet her last piece of bread. Rather, despair was on her agenda: *We are going to eat this last bread and then die.*

Elijah asked her for the one thing she didn’t think she could spare. Giving up her last resource, she could only lean on God. In this desperate moment she was pushed beyond her very limits to endure.

She was out of food and without any options, but God was ready to work a miracle. What she needed was to trust God enough to be obedient.

Are we confident that God is in charge and trusting him to work out the best plan for us?

Godly mentors develop a relationship of trust and stretch us in our obedience to God. God challenges us to move beyond our expectations and imaginings and to respond in obedience to the calling he has placed on our lives.

Where are we placing our trust? Are we helping others to stretch in new ways? How willing are we to stretch and be stretched? Is God alone really our only comfort in life and in death?

Lord, give us the courage to trust you as you move us outside of our comfort zone. May we help others to trust you and to follow boldly where you lead. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

ABRAHAM AND ISAAC: OBEDIENCE

“Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.”
—Genesis 22:2

Abraham must have been heartbroken. God had told him to sacrifice his beloved son. Through this only heir, Abraham and his descendants were to be blessed (Genesis 17:19). It could not have made sense to Abraham, but he trusted God and responded in obedience. Isaac too knew the love of his father, Abraham, and trusted him enough to follow his instructions.

Abraham modeled obedience to God for Isaac to see. If his father said that God would provide, that was enough. They did not know God’s plan, but they trusted God to be in charge. By faith “Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death” (Hebrews 11:19).

It is hard to trust God when we do not understand his plan,

when we cannot make sense of what God is calling us to do. Rather, we long to preserve the illusion that we are in charge of our life. We want God to work things out according to our plan, but that is not the way God works. God asks us to trust him and to obey.

Can we model obedience even when life does not make sense? Others look at our lives to see if we really live by the words we say. Do we model lives of obedience for others to see?

Lord, help me to know you more each day and to trust you to care for me. Let my life be characterized by obedience to you so that others may be drawn to you. Amen.

JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS: SEEING GOD'S PLAN

"Do not be distressed . . . for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you."
—Genesis 45:5

Joseph's story contains all the drama of reality television. In a shocking revelation, he exposed the truth about what had become of him. The misfit whom his brothers had sold into slavery was now a powerful ruler in Egypt! What would happen now that the tables had turned and Joseph was in control? His brothers, who had plotted his death, were now at his mercy! The brothers were terrified, unable even to answer Joseph. They had lived their lives in guilt and shame, and now came the moment of truth.

Fortunately for the brothers, Joseph was focused not on revenge but on how God had been at work in his life all along. Joseph had had some time to consider his situation, and his conclusion was this: *God put me here, and he has a plan for my life.* Joseph could see how the

difficulties in his life prepared him for the leadership position he now had. He could see how God had protected and guided him through all his experiences.

How has God been at work in your life, even in devastating times? As we mentor others, we share glimpses we have seen of God's faithfulness in our lives, equipping us for the challenges we have faced. God uses both the good and the bad for the greater good and for his glory. Tell someone today how God is working in your life!

Lord, thank you for giving us glimpses into your work in and through our lives. Thanks for using even difficult challenges for your glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.

MOSES AND JOSHUA: MOVING PAST JEALOUSY

Moses replied, "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!"

—Numbers 11:29

Joshua has been serving alongside Moses as an apprentice. At this point Moses is grooming Joshua to lead God's people, but he is still young and is sometimes a bit clueless.

Joshua shows immaturity in wanting his mentor to be the only one who offers spiritual leadership. He complains that two elders who have not been with the others are prophesying. Jealous that God has placed his gifts on some others, Joshua wants Moses to make them stop prophesying.

Moses helps Joshua to see the bigger picture. He points Joshua away from self-interest and back to God. God is the giver of gifts, not us. It is not our place to question the giver or even to desire the gifts of others, but rather to use our gifts in his service.

Jealousy limits our focus to ourselves and our desires. Moses instead mentored Joshua to see the wider view of all God's blessing. We should rejoice that God empowers others to work in his kingdom.

If we are pursuing faith for our own benefit, our heart is in the wrong place. Celebrate the gifts God has given you, and do not be jealous of the gifting and calling that God has placed on others. May our desire be that everyone experiences God's Spirit at work in their lives!

Lord, help me to be grateful for the gifts you have given me. May I never be jealous of another's gifts, but celebrate your equipping in all our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.

ELI AND SAMUEL: LISTENING FOR GOD

Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" —1 Samuel 3:9

Samuel was confused. He heard a voice and thought it was his mentor, Eli, calling for him. He kept going to Eli's room until it Eli realized that the voice was God trying to get Samuel's attention.

Listening for God is an important life skill, and God is not silent. We live in a noisy culture that often speaks in ways that are contrary to God's voice. It can be difficult to hear God if we are more in tune with the voice of this world.

As we listen for God, we will be more in tune with his leading in our lives. Eli mentored Samuel by teaching him how to respond to God's voice: "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening"—in other words, "I am ready to hear what you have to say, and I am ready to obey!"

God speaks to us in many ways. He speaks through creation, giving testimony to his faithfulness and creativity. He speaks through his Word, where we come to understand his salvation and purpose for us. He speaks through wise mentors in our lives. He speaks through life situations, opening and closing doors. God speaks by his Holy Spirit, equipping us with gifts and passions to use for service in his kingdom.

How are you experiencing God's leading in your life? Are you listening attentively for God's voice?

Lord, make us people who are in tune with your voice. Let us seek your leading throughout our life. Equip us to follow your direction, we pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.

GOD AND JONAH: RADIATE COMPASSION

"I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love"
—Jonah 4:2

Jonah was not the best mentee. He fled from doing the job God called him to do and was defiant to the point of death, being thrown in the sea to die. He is the poster child for strong-willed defiance against God. The Lord could have abandoned Jonah to his rebellion, but our long-suffering God radiates compassion.

God teaches Jonah about his loving, compassionate nature again and again. He forgives Jonah his defiance and gives him another chance to obey.

Much to Jonah's dismay, God also compassionately forgives Nineveh when they repent. Jonah sulks like a stubborn child, still hoping that God will destroy the city. Jonah likes God's compassion toward him, but he prefers that other sinners receive God's punishment rather than his grace.

God again shows compassion by giving Jonah an object lesson in the form of a little vine. When the vine withers, Jonah throws a tantrum, but God steps into the teachable moment. If Jonah is concerned about a little plant, shouldn't God be concerned about the many people he has made? Our God is a compassionate mentor who patiently teaches, persisting with us even in our defiance.

Is there a defiant person in your life who needs some compassion?

Lord, thank you for being our compassionate mentor who forgives our sins and restores us to fellowship. Help us to extend your compassion to others as you have done for us in Christ. Amen.

JOB AND FRIENDS: TRUSTING IN GOD'S CONTROL

"I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth."
—Job 19:25

Job endured the worst of life's miseries. Yet he modeled for his friends and family how to stand before God in the midst of trials. Job did not curse God as his wife had suggested (Job 2:9). And he did not listen to the bad advice that his friends gave him.

One thing was clear to Job: "I know that my redeemer lives." Job understood that he had a big God who was in control and that one day, when all the suffering was over, he would understand more fully.

Job did not pretend he had not suffered. He had lost nearly everything. He had also lost all respect in the community. Everyone looked down on him, assuming he had sinned. His life was miserable, but that did not change the central truth that God was still in control.

The only thing Job repented of was that he eventually

demanded an explanation from God. He learned it was enough to trust that God was in control and had a plan for his life. (See Job 40-42.)

There is much we do not fully understand in this life, and, like Job, we can envision that in heaven one day our understanding will be clear.

Even when things are a mess, can you believe that the God of the universe is still in control? Share your testimony of trusting that God is faithful!

Dear Lord, help us never to doubt that you are in control. May we trust in your love and faithfulness despite any challenges we face. Empower us to testify to your greatness. In Jesus' name, Amen.

ELIJAH AND ELISHA: COMMITMENT

Elisha . . . took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. . . . He set out to follow Elijah and became his servant. —1 Kings 19:21

Elijah the prophet placed his cloak over the shoulders of Elisha the farmer. At God's command, Elijah was summoning Elisha to leave his farm and take on the work of prophet for God's people. Elisha was to be Elijah's apprentice. This was not a small request, and it would require a great commitment from Elisha.

Elisha made his commitment clear. He brought an end to his old occupation by killing his oxen, burning the plow to cook the meat, and sharing it with his family and neighbors. They joined in as witnesses recognizing this change in his life. Elisha wanted to show God and everyone that he was fully committed to this new call and mentoring relationship. Trusting God as he went forward, Elisha did not look back.

Discipleship requires a willingness to be taught and redirect-

ed. It requires a commitment to letting the Spirit work in our lives. Hesitation and looking back are not going to work. Either God is our only comfort, or we will try in vain to find comfort elsewhere. Discipleship does not always demand a major career change, but it does require placing everything in God's service. Taking a step of faith requires a full commitment to being discipled.

Like Elisha, do you need to put away things from your past to be committed to being discipled by the Spirit?

Lord, help us to be fully committed to being your disciples. Help us to throw off anything that entangles us and hinders our commitment to you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

PHILIP AND THE ETHIOPIAN: LOVING QUESTIONS

Philip . . . heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. —Acts 8:30

The Ethiopian was a prominent official—he had charge of his queen's treasury. He was also a God-fearing man and was returning from Jerusalem, where he had gone to worship God. During the long chariot ride home he occupied himself by reading from the book of Isaiah. As the man struggled to understand what it all meant, God connected him with a teacher.

God sent an angel to direct Philip to the desert road heading south. Philip obeyed, and the Spirit urged him to approach the chariot of the Ethiopian official.

As Philip heard the man reading, his heart opened to engage with him over the Scriptures. Philip asked a loving question: "Do you understand what you are reading?"

Because Philip was obedient in following God's leading, he

was given the opportunity to see God's transformative power in the life of this man from a foreign land.

Would you have asked such a question of a stranger? Is God bringing you into places where you can come alongside others with questions like that? How might we ask loving questions to engage the people around us in conversations of faith?

It takes courage and a sense of bold confidence to trust the Spirit's leading in situations like this. Do you trust the Spirit to guide you?

Lord, give us courage to lovingly engage with others. Help us to reach out in love to those around us with what you have given us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

ABRAHAM AND LOT: RELATIONSHIPS FIRST

"Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right . . ."
—Genesis 13:9

Abraham had mentored Lot for years, but their family cooperative had reached its limits. The local grazing land could not support both of their herds. Their herdsmen argued and got on each other's nerves. They needed more space.

Abraham could have sided with his men against Lot or told Lot to know his place, but instead he valued their relationship over the petty details of disagreements. Abraham wanted to bless Lot and put tension out of their relationship.

Abraham loved Lot enough to give him the opportunity to take the best land. He was not concerned with having the best for himself, but was willing to let Lot make the first choice. He would accept whatever was left over. Rather than squabbling, Abraham trusted God to take care of him and provide for

his needs. He demonstrated to Lot that he cared about him. Abraham showed Lot that their relationship was more important than arguing over material things and desires.

All families can struggle when there is too much togetherness. Being too close under one roof, for example, can lead to tensions in relationships.

How are you showing that relationships are more important than things and desires? How can you prioritize the relationships in your life?

Lord, forgive us if we have made things and desires more important than people. Help us not to get pulled into senseless arguments, but to show your love to others always. In Jesus' name, Amen.

EPAPHRAS AND COLOSSAE: TEACHING GRACE

You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who . . . also told us of your love in the Spirit. —Colossians 1:7-8

The opening lines of Paul's letter to the Colossians are filled with praise. The good news of salvation and new life in Christ was spreading throughout the region, and the community was overflowing with God's love.

Epaphras played an instrumental role in starting the church in Colossae. He faithfully shared the gospel message with the people and helped them understand the hope to which God had called them. He helped the people understand God's grace.

When we understand grace, we see others differently. We develop love and generosity for our brothers and sisters because that is what God has given us. By God's grace we are forgiven our sins and given new life to enjoy with God forever, guided by his Holy Spirit.

For the Colossian church, God's grace was transforming their

world. They were producing the fruit of the Spirit, the gospel message was going out into the world, and people were coming to faith.

Part of our role in mentoring others is to help them understand the message of God's grace. Once we have understood the depths of God's grace for us, we want others to know it too. Have you shared with others the grace you have experienced? Tell someone today how God has been gracious to you!

Lord, thank you for your never-failing grace that does not treat us as our sins deserve. Thank you for loving, forgiving, and calling us to live for you. May we always marvel at your unfailing grace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

EPAPHRAS AND COLOSSAE: PRAYER

Epaphras . . . is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God . . . —Colossians 4:12

Although Epaphras had moved on to work with other groups of believers, he had not abandoned the Colossian church. He was persevering with them through his prayers. Though he was not physically present with them in worship, they were not forgotten. They were remembered in the most important of ways: prayer.

Prayer is an essential part of mentoring someone in faith. God is the one in charge of molding hearts, so it is important for us to petition God to keep us and those whom we are mentoring aligned with his will. Epaphras prayed that the people of Colossae would stand firm in the will of God.

Epaphras is described as *wrestling* in prayer for the Colossians. He was struggling and persevering in prayer for the people he loved. He had invested in them

initially by sharing his faith with them, and now he continued to invest in them by lifting them up in prayer to God.

We all have people we love whom we can pray for regularly. Jesus himself modeled for us what it meant to be faithful in prayer. If Jesus felt the need to intercede with his heavenly Father, how much more is this needed in our lives!

Consider today for whom you could be praying. Pray passionately for their faith and assurance and spiritual growth in Jesus' name!

Lord, help us to pray faithfully for all your people. Keep us all standing firmly in your will and growing in the grace of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

NATHAN AND DAVID: CONFRONTATION

Nathan said to David, "You are the man!"

—2 Samuel 12:7

It is never easy to tell someone we care about that they are wrong. It is even harder to have someone tell us that our own behavior is out of line.

Nathan knew that he had to give King David some difficult correction from God. He was probably nervous about how the powerful king would respond. Nathan chose a gentle way to help David understand the situation from another point of view. Nathan helped David to empathize with the person he had wronged.

Nathan mentored King David by helping him see where he had wandered from God's law. He spoke the truth that needed to be spoken in a loving way. When we confront someone, it needs to be done with great compassion. Ephesians 4:15 says, "Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the

mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ." We need not yell and scream as we call out bad behavior, because then we become a part of the problem. Instead we should use the mature approach, confronting with gentleness and kindness so that our words can be heard.

King David did not try to defend his sinful behavior; instead, he responded in penitence. His heart was softened to hear what he needed to hear. May we also hear God's Word and respond in love to Christian mentors who guide us to follow Jesus more closely.

Lord, help us to care for each other enough to lovingly confront wrong behavior. May we mentor one another to live obediently for you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

NAAMAN'S SERVANTS: SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

Naaman's servants . . . said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it?"

—2 Kings 5:13

When we think of mentors, we often think of an older person mentoring someone younger or a wise person mentoring someone who has much to learn. But mentors can come in many forms.

Naaman's servant girl had no standing. She was a child, a female, and a slave. She had no training and no stature, but she knew the power of God. She was bold in sharing what she knew about God. If she had kept quiet, Naaman might never have received his miracle.

Later Naaman's own pride nearly derailed the blessing that Elisha, as the prophet of God, had promised. But Naaman's servants spoke up to redirect him to the purpose of their visit.

It was quite a risk for those servants to speak up to correct their commander, but

God used their words to draw Naaman back to the instructions of the prophet.

Each mentor in this story spoke God's truth into the life of someone in authority over them. That required courage. They spoke the truth with care and concern, and God used them to carry out his miracle of healing.

Even the weak can speak God's truth into the lives of others, pointing them to God.

Lord, give us boldness to share your truth even when doing so seems difficult. Give us courage to speak your truth in love each day. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WITNESSES TO THE KING: FACING ADVERSITY

“God . . . has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and . . . were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God.” —Daniel 3:28

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego knew that their first allegiance was to God and they should worship only him. Nebuchadnezzar did not recognize any authority above his own; he wanted to be the object of worship. He had commissioned a great statue and ordered that everyone must bow and worship his image or face execution by fire in a furnace.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were willing to face the anger of the king and even die rather than deny their heavenly Father, in whose image they were made. They faced adversity with courage and modeled for the king what it looked like to honor the convictions of their faith. Their testimony is compelling. In effect, they said, “We believe God is able to save us, but even if he does not do

that in this life, we will not worship anyone but him.”

This statement enraged the king so much that he raised the temperature to the point that even the soldiers in charge of these men were killed by the heat. But God protected his servants from the fire and allowed them to leave the furnace unscathed. After the dramatic rescue of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the king had a change of heart and praised God. Their faith mentored the king himself.

Do you have the courage to stand up for your convictions in the face of adversity?

Father, give us the courage to be faithful in adversity. May we reflect your image even in hard times. In Christ, Amen.

PRISCILLA, AQUILA, AND APOLLOS: GUIDANCE

[Apollos] began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately. —Acts 18:26

Far from his home in Egyptian Alexandria, Apollos was preaching about Jesus in Ephesus. Apollos was a learned man, but he didn't have the whole story. He needed someone to come alongside and help him understand the gospel more completely.

Priscilla and Aquila heard Apollos speaking in the local synagogue and invited him to their home. They chose a wise mentoring approach with Apollos. Rather than correcting him in public or openly challenging his teaching, they fostered a relationship with him in the context of loving fellowship. They guided Apollos by clearly explaining God's Word to him.

This couple did not just go home and criticize the preacher. They did not tell their neighbors how Apollos was getting things wrong. Rather, they went

to him directly and invested in him, reaching out in love and gaining a friend and colleague in ministry.

Apollos learned from Priscilla and Aquila, and he went on to preach with great vigor. He was corrected in a way that encouraged and strengthened him for effective ministry.

How would our communities be if we chose to guide others in more loving fellowship? Choose to come alongside and invest in people's lives!

Lord, give us compassion for one another so that we can speak the truth in love. May we offer correction in encouraging ways. Help us to invest in one another and care enough to correct in love. Amen.

PAUL AND THE GALATIANS: REDIRECTING

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. —Galatians 1:6-7

Paul begins his letter to the Galatian church with his traditional greeting of grace and peace. But he soon launches into the main reason for his letter. He has heard reports of disobedience and false teaching. His disappointment and frustration continue throughout the book. How could the Galatians he loves have wandered so far? Why have they turned their backs on his teaching? Paul laments, “You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth?” (Galatians 5:7).

This must have been a difficult letter for Paul to write. But he rebuked the Galatian church because he loved them. They were his spiritual children. If he didn't care about them or their salvation, he would not have written the letter. Paul was angry with the false teachers who

had led the Galatians astray, and he was passionate about helping those he loved.

We all have a tendency to wander from God's truth. We need people in our lives who love us enough to confront us and redirect our bad behavior. Sometimes the people we love wander from the truth they once knew. Will we choose to persist with them and love them enough to redirect them?

Lord, help us to love enough to confront and redirect others back to you. Place people in our life to call out our bad behavior and draw us back into fellowship with you. Thank you, Jesus, for loving us and restoring us to you. Amen.

DORCAS AND THE POOR: GENEROSITY

In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor.

—Acts 9:36

Often mentoring will involve giving to others. When we recognize that every gift we have is from God's hand and not something we have earned or are entitled to, we become more open to sharing our time, talents, and possessions. As we are filled with God's grace, the natural response is to share generously with others.

Dorcas was known for her compassion for the poor in her community. She was known for doing good and investing in those who had needs. Her relationship with God was not just for herself but also for the benefit of others.

The death of Dorcas left her community in distress. Friends searched for Peter to see if there was something he could do. Widows showed him all the clothing Dorcas had made for them—gifts that reminded them

of her love. Gifts placed in the hand of someone in need point to the hand of the heavenly Father, who loves us completely and generously supplies all that we need.

Our culture tends to focus on accumulating wealth instead of giving to people in need. Dorcas, described as a disciple, was one who imitated the generosity of God.

How can you show God's generous heart to someone in need this week?

Lord, help me to care for others with the love that you show me. Help me to give willingly with a cheerful heart as you have given to me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

HANNAH AND SAMUEL: LETTING GO

"I give him to the LORD. For his whole life he will be given over to the LORD."
—1 Samuel 1:28

Hannah had prayed desperately for a son and had vowed that if the Lord gave her a son, he would be dedicated to God's service. Now she fulfilled her promise and entrusted her son to Eli's care. We can imagine how challenging that day was for her. Letting go can be difficult.

We too experience difficult moments of letting go of the ones we love. We send loved ones off to remote places; we drop children off at camp; we send teenagers off to college. Sometimes we say goodbye to those whom we probably will not see till we meet again in heaven. As we say goodbye, we trust God to be in charge and do what is best. We believe that he will keep those whom we love in his care. We can take heart when we recognize that God is the one who is ultimately in control. We can en-

trust those whom we love to his compassionate heart, knowing that the Lord loves them even more deeply than we do. We can even pray over them, commissioning them to go with God.

Hannah had joy in her prayer (1 Samuel 2) because she knew God was in charge of her child. She had given him to the Lord, who had blessed her with him in the first place. She trusted that her son's whole life was in God's hands. We too can let go when we believe the Lord is holding our loved ones tight.

Lord, help us to trust you to care for those we love. Give us the courage to let go, knowing that you are holding those we love. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

MORDECAI AND ESTHER: OPPORTUNE CALLING

“Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”
—Esther 4:14

Esther was upset to see her uncle distraught and in mourning. She wanted to help her people, but her uncle's request was terrifying. If she went into the king's presence uninvited, she would be risking her life.

Mentors challenge us to see a bigger picture and follow our calling. They guide us beyond our fears to wonder how God might want to involve us in his work.

Mordecai said, in effect, “Have you considered that this might be part of God's plan for your life?”

Mordecai knew that God would work out his plan with or without her, but if she could help, this could be an opportunity to be involved in building up God's kingdom.

Mentors help us discern how God is calling us to use our gifts, talents, and opportuni-

ties to further his kingdom. We each have unique opportunities to serve God, but they are not without risk. Like Esther, we should consider our calling with prayer and fasting. When we perceive where God is leading, we should take bold steps to follow obediently.

Have you considered how God wants to use you? Prayerfully ask God for his guidance. Help those whom you mentor to see how God might be equipping them to serve him.

Lord, thank you for the unique way you have equipped me to serve. Help me to serve you with my gifts each day. Help me also to encourage the people around me to serve you faithfully. In Jesus' name, Amen.

NAOMI AND RUTH: UNINTENTIONAL MENTOR

Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God." —Ruth 1:16

Naomi was in foreign territory, physically and emotionally. She lived in a foreign land not by choice but because of famine in her home country. She also suffered the overwhelming loss of her husband and sons there. Naomi described herself as bitter and empty. She probably did not see herself as a worthy mentor to her daughters-in-law.

We don't know how the relationship began with Naomi and her daughters-in-law. But a strong bond had formed between them. When Naomi encouraged them to leave her as she returned to her homeland, these young women declared their loyalty to her, saying, "We will go back with you to your people."

Naomi explained that there was virtually no hope of a family future for them in her homeland. Orpah then said goodbye,

but Ruth was not persuaded to leave Naomi. She made a passionate commitment, saying, "Your people will be my people and your God my God." Through a loving relationship, Ruth expressed faith both to Naomi and to her God.

We never know what influence our words and actions might have on the lives of others, even when we feel empty. Our life is an example to others of what Christianity looks like, whether we choose to be a mentor or not. What will others see as they engage with you today?

Lord, give us the courage to set a godly example for others to follow. May others see you through the love we share. In Jesus' name, Amen.

BARNABAS AND SAUL (PAUL): AFFIRMATION

Barnabas . . . told them how Saul . . . had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.

—Acts 9:27

Saul was not well received when he came to Jerusalem as a believer in Christ. The disciples were afraid of him. Saul had been a persecutor of Christ's followers, so they didn't trust him and hesitated to welcome him into their fellowship.

Barnabas, however, helped to support Saul in his new calling. Barnabas had stature in the community. He was a wealthy landowner who had sold some land to support the cause of the apostles (Acts 4:36-37). His name means "son of encouragement," and he lived up to this name.

Barnabas took the initiative to seek out Saul and listen to his story. Barnabas not only forgave Saul for the pain he had caused, but also affirmed Saul's conversion and ministry, and brought him to the apostles so that he might partner with

them in ministry. The disciples were probably stunned to see the complete transformation of Saul's heart! And through the supportive encouragement of Barnabas, they reconciled with Saul and gained a passionate coworker in God's kingdom.

We all need forgiveness, reconciliation, and affirmation. We have been forgiven and restored in Christ. We are ambassadors of Christ, called to represent him and his offer of grace to others. Is there someone in your life who needs another chance and affirmation?

Lord, give me the compassionate strength to reach out and affirm someone who needs another chance. Make me a living ambassador of your grace. Amen.

BARNABAS AND MARK: ANOTHER CHANCE

They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus —Acts 15:39

Some of us learn slowly. We are stubborn, we mess up, and we learn lessons the hard way. We need a mentor to guide our steps and to be our advocate.

Mark messed up too. He had gone with Paul and Barnabas on a missionary journey, but along the way he had given up and deserted them. Paul thought it would be unwise to take him on another journey.

But Barnabas was willing to mentor Mark. Barnabas advocated for giving him another chance. Paul and Barnabas had such a sharp disagreement over this that they parted ways. Paul left with Silas, and Barnabas left with Mark. Even so, God continued to work through them to take the gospel to different places.

Mark benefited from being given another chance, and so did others. We see later that

Paul also reconciled with Mark, saying to Timothy, “Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry” (2 Timothy 4:11). In addition, the Spirit of God led Mark to write an account of Jesus’ life and ministry. We know it today as the gospel of Mark in the Bible.

As mentors, we model our life on God, who forgives and challenges us to live holy lives. Who in your life needs forgiveness and another chance? For whom could you be an advocate?

Lord, sometimes it is hard to forgive. Help us to remember how we have been forgiven, and help us to extend your grace to others. In the name of Jesus, our forgiver. Amen.

PAUL TO TIMOTHY: FOLLOW YOUR GIFTING

Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the . . . elders laid their hands on you. —1 Timothy 4:14

As Paul mentors young Pastor Timothy, he shares advice about the orderly running of a congregation. Timothy receives helpful instruction about worship behavior and establishing leadership within the church. Paul offers some personal advice as well: *Do not neglect the gift you received from the Holy Spirit.*

Paul knew Timothy was gifted, and he urged Timothy to cultivate his gift. We are not told specifically what it was. It could have been preaching, prophecy, healing, or any number of things. Timothy received this gift when the elders laid their hands on him and commissioned him for ministry.

We have all been equipped by God with gifts for service in ministry. Every one of us is on a mission field and prepared by God to face that calling. Sometimes our gifts fall into disuse

because we are busy or distracted. Maybe some gifts are set aside for a season in favor of others. Timothy was very busy establishing his congregation, so Paul reminded Timothy that the gift God had given him was not to be neglected.

Paul's advice still rings true: "Do not neglect your gift." Whatever gifting God has equipped you with is for a purpose. Step into new ways you can use your gifts to serve God's kingdom. What gifts has God given you that can be used to bless others?

Lord, thank you for the way you have gifted each one of us. Forgive us for the ways we may have neglected your blessings, and help us to further your kingdom. In Jesus' name, Amen.

PAUL AND TIMOTHY: SHARING BROKENNESS

Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.

—1 Timothy 1:13

Have you thought you needed to have your act more together before you could mentor others? You may have felt you might need a mentor more than you could be one. Paul set an example by mentoring and sharing from his own struggles. He chose to share how God's grace was at work in his life despite his missteps.

Paul understood how messed up he was without Christ. Paul named his sins, which included blasphemy, persecution, violence, ignorance, and unbelief. How many of us would be willing to own up to the ways we have offended God?

Paul was able to mentor Timothy not because he was so good but because of the work God had done in his life. Paul shared about his sinfulness to help Timothy see the grace that God had sent his way. Paul did

not want Timothy to see him as a hero but instead pointed Timothy to Jesus.

Mentors don't pretend that they have it all together. The blessing they share is how Christ is revealed through their own failures. Mentors share their story of God's faithfulness. We all have opportunities to share how God's grace has been poured out abundantly in our lives. Will we be transparent enough to share how God is restoring our brokenness?

Lord, help me to be honest about my sinfulness, and guide me to tell others about your grace. May my only boast be in Jesus Christ, whose grace is sufficient to overcome all our sins. In his precious name, Amen.

DANIEL: VISIBLE HABITS

Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before. —Daniel 6:10

Daniel's habits of prayer were known to the people around him. He practiced his rituals of faith openly before his community. There was no question of where Daniel's allegiance centered. The king himself commented about the God whom Daniel continually served (Daniel 6:16).

Rituals can get a bad name as empty routines that have no meaning—or worse as showy demonstrations of spirituality. But they can also be helpful disciplines—powerful practices to reorient our hearts to God in the midst of life's chaos. Regular routines are helpful for keeping us centered on God. Neglecting prayer and the study of God's Word results in spiritual depletion. Rather, we need a break from busyness, and quiet time with God helps us reconnect

with him as the source of our strength and encouragement.

As mentors, we can share how God is still working on us. We can demonstrate the value of time in prayer and in God's Word that shapes us into the people God has called us to be. We need to be regularly connected to the vine if we are going to see fruit develop in our lives (John 15).

What spiritual habits are you engaging in to keep your life focused on God? How have you been blessed by routines of nurturing faith?

Lord, help us to establish regular habits of prayer, worship, and engaging with your Word. May our habits of faith draw others to know you more. In Jesus' name, Amen.

LYDIA AND THE PHILIPPIANS: TAKE INITIATIVE

When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home.
—Acts 16:15

Paul and his companions visited Philippi on their journey to share the good news of Jesus. At the river outside the city gate, they found “a place of prayer” where Lydia and some other women gathered for worship on the Sabbath.

Lydia was a dealer in rare purple cloth, an entrepreneur with her own business. It took initiative and drive for her to thrive as a merchant, and she applied those same qualities to worshipping and serving God.

When Paul shared the gospel that day, the Spirit opened Lydia’s heart to respond. She and her household were baptized. Lydia then took the initiative to invite Paul and his fellow travelers to stay at her house.

This fellowship became a refuge for Paul and his companions. When he and Silas

were wrongfully jailed and later released, they went directly to Lydia’s house (Acts 16:40). The church in Philippi also gave generously to care for Paul’s needs as he traveled to other towns (Philippians 4:14-16).

These believers in Philippi took the initiative and built an active community of faith. And Paul thanked them for their “partnership in the gospel,” confident that the Lord would carry on the good work there “to completion” (Philippians 1:5-6).

Mentors take the initiative in blessing others. Follow the Spirit and make the first move, opening the door for another’s benefit. When you feel God’s urging, take action!

Lord, help us to see your working among us. Embolden us to follow you in action. Amen.

HOLY SPIRIT: MENTORING AND SHAPING US

"The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."
—John 14:26

As Jesus tells his disciples that he is leaving, he shares news about a new mentor. Jesus announces that the Spirit of truth is coming to be with his followers forever.

The Spirit has many mentoring roles in the lives of believers. Among other things, the Spirit reminds us of what Christ has taught us. The Spirit produces fruit in our lives (Galatians 5:22-23). The Spirit convicts us of our sin (John 16:8). The Spirit testifies about Jesus and challenges us to testify also (John 15:26-27). God has placed his Spirit within us to focus us on the truth. The Spirit mentors us by reminding us of God's teaching. We will be convicted of our sin by his instruction revealed to us in Scripture.

The Spirit mentors us day by day without our having to schedule an appointment. All we need to

do is come with a willing heart to hear God's Word. The Spirit will do the heavy lifting of convicting our hearts and reshaping our lives.

Are you allowing the Spirit to mentor you and shape your life? Is there someone in your life who could use some reminding of God's truth in Scripture? Follow the Spirit's lead to bear fruit and testify about Jesus, allowing the Spirit to do his transforming work in you and others.

Lord, let your Spirit take up residence in us and produce the lasting fruit of transformation within us. Make us Spirit-filled people who testify to your greatness. In Jesus, Amen.

JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES: CLEAR GUIDANCE

"Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." —Matthew 28:19-20

Mentors help by providing a clear vision for the mission ahead.

At the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus gave his disciples clear instructions. They were to make disciples throughout all the nations, baptizing and teaching wherever they went.

These echo the instructions given in Deuteronomy 6:4-7. The Israelites were instructed to love God above all, to obey his commands, and to talk about him in all they did each day so that their children and others would come to know God.

Our expression of faith is not only vertical, worshiping God alone, but also horizontal, showing God to everyone around us. Our faith is meant to be shared so that others can worship God. This is our mission.

We overflow with what we love. Everyone sees our priorities—they spill out in plain view. Are we so filled with God's love and grace that we positively drip with it? Our very shoes are squishy with the gifts of God. In our going about, is God's love spilling over to the people whom God has placed around us?

God has done great things for each of us. You have a story of God's faithfulness. Have you shared it? Who needs to hear your words of testimony?

Father, make us disciple makers. May we always overflow with your grace to those around us. In Jesus' name we pray, by your Spirit. Amen.

JESUS AND PEOPLE: AVAILABILITY

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

—Matthew 28:20

Jesus often stopped to talk with and care for people who had needs or questions—people who were poor, ill, or doubtful. This took a lot of time and energy. Jesus understood self-care and made time for prayer and quiet away from everyone, but he also made himself radically available to whomever he met.

Even as he prepared to ascend to heaven, Jesus promised to be with his followers. When Jesus gave his parting instructions, he did not abandon his disciples to the task, but rather said, “I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Jesus has given us his Spirit to walk with us through whatever challenges we face. The Spirit is always here, God with us.

As mentors, we can't match the 24/7 availability of the Holy Spirit, but we can choose to

give people high priority. Jesus made time for people and reminds us that whatever we do for others, we do for him (Matthew 25:40). In the Spirit of Christ, mentors make themselves available to help others along the way.

May we be as ready to serve, guide, redirect, encourage, confront, teach, share, testify, question, understand, listen, advise, and mentor others as Jesus, by his Spirit, has mentored us. In the Lord's strength, are you available for others, and thus for him to work through you, today?

Lord, give us the courage and strength to make ourselves available to others. May we invest in people's lives so that the name of Jesus is known throughout the earth. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

A THRIVING LIFE

That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season.
—Psalm 1:3

Calendars often include beautiful landscapes to illustrate the seasons of the year. Turn the pages of a typical wall calendar, and you'll see artwork of snowy mountains in winter, budding greenery in spring, beaches in summer, and colorful trees or harvest fields in autumn.

Psalm 1 speaks of trees and seasons too. In this psalm I see a perpetual oasis formed by the trees of the righteous planted around the throne of God. What a picture that would make for a calendar—row upon row of cedars, palms, firs, olive trees, and other evergreens in every shade of emerald surrounding the presence of God, each one a symbol of a thriving life watered by the study of God's Word.

The truly blessed are those who learn from God's Word and live it. Unlike people who

treat God's Word flippantly, the faithful believer trusts Scripture to be a reliable guide to life. Happiness is found in loving and living by God's teachings. Our delight, the psalmist says, is in those teachings, the law of God.

Each season of the year offers us opportunities to experience our world in new ways. We drive, fly, ride, walk, or sail to see new scenery or to experience new places. This month let's explore a season in the psalms and take in all the scenery and experiences they offer.

Together we can delight in the law of God.

O God, make us like trees rooted deep beside the river of your goodness and with branches lush with the fruit of your Spirit. Amen.

ASTOUNDING FINGER WORKS

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them . . . ?

—Psalm 8:3-4

Nothing can draw out our “oohs” and “aahs” like dazzling displays in the sky. A sparkling vista of stars, a gold-drenched sunset, a lofty landscape of clouds—all these can summon our responses of awe.

But the immense expanse of God’s canvas can also make us wonder where we tiny human beings belong in comparison. Who are we that God would even take notice of us when it seems that so much else is bigger and grander in God’s world? How could God be concerned for people who so often disappoint him?

Wait, says the psalmist; God does notice us. God created us with as much care and attention to detail as he put into the starry skies. God created us only a little lower than the angels! We have great worth because we bear the image of

our Creator. And just as clouds reflect the light of the sun, we were created to reflect the glory of God.

Even more, because he became a human being like us, Jesus Christ shows us how to perfectly reflect God’s glory (Hebrews 2:5-9). Now we are a bit lower than the angels, but Jesus, when he comes to reign over the new heavens and earth, will raise all who belong to him above the angels to be where he is (1 Corinthians 6:2-3; Hebrews 2:5-18). That’s something to “ooh” and “aah” over!

We give you thanks, Lord, for your amazing earth and heavens, and for your glory, which shines in all we see. May our lives today honor you, our Creator. Amen.

A DAY IN THE SUN

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
—Psalm 19:1

There's nothing like bright sunshine to chase away clouds of weariness and anxiety. Soaking up the sun's warmth and light can restore serenity faster than any potion or self-help advice. And if reflections of those rays are winking off gentle waves in a calm breeze, so much the better.

Heavens declare, and skies proclaim, day after day and night after night. The sun, like a joyful celestial runner, sets out in hope and rests in victory. All of creation testifies to the glory and splendor of God.

The psalmist goes on to remind us that the Creator of the world is the Creator of the Word, that just as the sun's light benefits all of natural life, God's perfect law enhances the lives of God's people.

Yet the glory of the Creator and the love of the Redeemer mean

little if they are not equally displayed on the horizon of our lives. A life that rejoices in God's sovereignty and delights in God's beauty; a life that knows what is right, true, and just and isn't afraid to name it; and a life that kneels before its maker and owner and lays its thoughts and words—everything it says and thinks—before God as a sacrifice of praise: this is the life our Creator calls us to consider.

In what ways do you sense God calling you to a life that witnesses to him?

Let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, Jesus, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

A LIVING DESERT

You lay me in the dust of death.

—Psalm 22:15

Sand is beautiful. Sprinkled around the shoulder of a lake, it forms an exquisite collar. Blowing winds tease beach sand into blond dunes and pale valleys. Even the loneliest desert has austere beauty; absence paints its own splendor.

The absence of God is never beautiful, though; it is death. Desperately our psalmist cries out, asking God to come and find him. In effect, the psalmist says, “Without your help I will die in this wilderness.”

God is never too far away to hear a call for help. God will come to the rescue. Our story of desertion is also one of recovery—a story meant to be punctuated by frequent hallelujahs.

Our lives can have moments of despair and abandonment. The desert can be the last place we

want to travel through in any season, yet it may seem like the only place our feet will take us. Our hope rests in God’s unseen presence. God’s strength will compensate for our weakness; God’s comfort will soothe our afflicted hearts.

Our stories of the desert and the dirt are ones we don’t want to tell. We’d rather share news of our victories and daring deeds crowned with success. Yet the psalmist reminds us that our worst moments and greatest weaknesses reveal God’s strength and faithfulness best.

Lord God, you found me suffering in the desert and rescued me. Thank you for sending your Son to the cross to save me from the desert of sin and death. Amen.

THE VALLEY OF SHADOWS

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

—Psalm 23:4

Sheep are difficult animals to care for. They are totally dependent on the shepherd for food, guidance, and protection. Even at night, someone has to watch over the sleeping sheep in case predators attack or something else frightens them and they panic. In the chaos, lambs can be badly hurt and adult sheep injured. The work of a good shepherd never ends.

This psalm is about the Lord as a shepherd who faithfully tends his sheep. Jesus is the good shepherd (John 10:11), the great shepherd (Hebrews 13:20-21), and the chief shepherd (1 Peter 5:4). As Jesus is our shepherd, so we are his sheep—not dumb, frightened animals, but obedient followers wise enough to follow the one who will lead us in the right ways to the right places.

Our shepherd knows the “green pastures” and “still waters” that

will restore us. We will reach these places only by following him obediently.

Death casts a frightening shadow over us because we are entirely helpless in its presence. We can struggle with other enemies—pain, disease, injury—but in the end our strength and courage cannot overcome death. Only one person can walk with us through that shadowy valley and bring us safely to the other side. Jesus, the perfect shepherd, promises to guide and protect us and bring us into his home forever.

When you recognize the good shepherd, follow him!

Good Shepherd, help me always to trust in your watchful care and mercy. Help me to be faithful. In your name, Amen.

WASH YOUR HANDS

Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart . . .
—Psalm 24:3-4

In ancient times a bowl of water was placed at the entrance of the place of worship so that everyone who came to worship the Lord could wash their hands before coming inside. It offered everyone an opportunity to reflect about who God is in comparison to us, and to be reminded to humble oneself in God's presence.

Psalm 24 asks, "Who is worthy to stand in the holy presence of God?" The answer: Only those who have "clean hands and a pure heart." What does the psalmist mean by that?

Such people do not "trust in an idol or swear by a false god." Being dishonest or deceitful is something God hates. Perhaps that's because God knows how easily we can deceive ourselves about what we truly worship or about where we actually place our trust.

What dirty objects are we clasping in our hands, holding onto for dear life, as if they have the power to be our God?

Jesus knew the cleansing power of water. He showed his skill with a bowl of water and a towel as he washed his disciples' dirty feet (John 13). Being willing to acknowledge the dirt on our hands and feet is the first step in becoming his disciples.

When was the last time you checked to see if your hands were clean?

"Clean hands and a pure heart," Lord—that is what we pray for today. Your grace and love are the soap we need. Thank you. In Jesus, Amen.

MAY I BE YOUR FRIEND?

The LORD confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them.
—Psalm 25:14

Our psalmist is in trouble and danger. Enemies are threatening. In effect, the psalmist cries out, “God, help!” But this is more than a cry for help; this psalm is also a plea for forgiveness. Repeatedly the psalmist asks God to forget, to forgive, and to be gracious.

In answer to his prayer for help and forgiveness, the writer seeks guidance, the wise counsel of a friend and confidant. Looking to the one who knows everything about him, the psalmist asks God for direction and teaching in order to see the path he should take.

The psalmist ends this prayer with a commitment to follow through on this request—the bodyguards of uprightness and integrity will accompany him as he receives God’s counsel and advice. Uprightness, the straightforward knowing of

God’s ways and understanding who God wants him to be, will be on one side. And integrity, following through on God’s guidance and walking the way God directs him to walk, will be on the other side.

Each day choices need to be made, decisions acted on, life lived. Psalm 25 invites us to live under the gentle tutoring of God, to humbly submit to the holy wisdom that will help us make faithful decisions, to rely on the steadfast one whose friendship will guide us to the right choices.

Are you seeking God’s counsel today?

What a friend we have in you, Jesus! Help us to be faithful in return, loving you with all our heart, soul, and mind. Amen.

EVENING TEARS AND MORNING JOY

His anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.

—Psalm 30:5

“I was lost, but now I am found!”

“I was on the brink of death, but now I am healed!”

“I was drowning in despair, but now I have hope!”

Words like these are a strong testimony to the power of God to save, heal, and restore.

Psalm 30 gives us a similar testimony. God has heard the psalmist’s prayers, and the writer rejoices at the way God has answered so completely. Indeed, tears of grief turn to tears of joy, and the sound of wailing is replaced with singing and dancing.

By thanking God publicly, the psalmist invites others to share in his joy and praise. “This is who God is,” he is saying, in effect, to his fellow worshipers; “God is the one who saved me, and here is how he did it.”

Experiencing God’s deliverance isn’t something we can easily forget. It changes the way we live, the way we worship, and the way we pray.

Does anyone near you today need to hear this testimony to answered prayer? It’s important that they hear it so that they can dare to pray their prayers for help. We all need the assurance that God hears and responds to our prayers.

Who needs to hear your testimony today?

O Lord our God, you take away our grief and replace it with joy. Help us to know you always hear us and care for us. We give you thanks forever. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

TASTE AND SEE

Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.
—Psalm 34:8

“Try it; you’ll like it.”

That’s what David is urging us to do. He is inviting us to experience what he has discovered: the goodness of God’s salvation. David is celebrating that God has rescued him from his fears and troubles.

Psalm 34 is a song of gratitude we can all sing when God brings us out of a “close call” situation. But David’s joy is only a foretaste of the future redemption God will bring to all who trust in him, to all whom God will redeem through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

God promises great blessings to his people. God will deliver, guard, supply, listen, and redeem all who trust in his power to save. God himself also gives us the ability to believe and trust in him. And in response we seek to honor him in all

things, speak truthfully, seek peace and justice, and humbly serve our God.

“Taste and see that the LORD is good.” This psalm is an invitation to take God at his word, to trust in the Lord and experience his goodness firsthand, to know God personally, realizing that he loves us more than we can imagine.

The invitation is ours to receive, but it is also ours to extend. What opportunities has God given us to share his invitation with others? Whom would God ask us to include in his rescue and deliverance?

Jesus, bread of life, living water, thank you for the hearty taste of salvation and new life. In your name we pray. Amen.

TRUE DELIGHT

Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.
—Psalm 37:4

The smell of flowers, the sound of a soft rain, the taste of a freshly baked cookie—all delightful! But knowing God, David says, is the most delightful experience of all.

How do we get to know God? It begins with God, actually, for God is the one who has created us, provided for us, and made clear to us that he is our Creator and Savior. And God calls us to trust in him and live by his ways, to commit ourselves wholly to him, entrusting our lives, families, jobs, possessions—everything—to his control and guidance. We grow to recognize that God can care for us better than we can care for ourselves. Along the way we also learn to be patient and willing to wait for God to work out what is best for us.

To delight in someone means to experience great pleasure and joy in his or her presence. That

happens only when we know the person well. To delight in the Lord means not simply that we know God, but that we know him well.

To make sure we can know God as deeply and intimately as God wants us to know him, the Lord came to us in Jesus Christ and lived with us so that we could meet him in person. He showed his love in countless ways, taught and challenged us to live for God's kingdom, prayed for us, gave up his own life as the payment for our sin, and rose to life again in victory over sin and death—all for our sake! To know God is to know Jesus and take delight in him!

Dear Lord, our greatest delight is found in you. May we delight you in all we do and say. Amen.

SATISFYING OUR THIRST

*As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you,
my God.*
—Psalm 42:1

On a hot day, nothing cools and revives us like water. Whether we drink it, splash our faces with it, or plunge into it—water refreshes. Our eyes can thirst for the sight of it and our ears long for the sound of it. A spectacular waterfall can take our breath away. There is nothing else in creation like water; it is essential to life.

Our psalmist shares our appreciation. Stranded far away from God's temple, which symbolized God's presence among his people, the psalmist ached to be nearer, yearned to be with God in the traditional place of worship. Yet the writer reminded himself that God could be found close at hand too.

Deprived of the fresh stream of water that is God, sometimes we try to refill our souls with our tears, but they can't satisfy our thirst. Reminding ourselves

of what God has done for us in the past can be a refreshing drink; remembering God's promises can soak us in waves of hope. When others share stories with us of how God has quenched their thirst, they push us into the pool of God's grace. These psalms assure us that there is plenty of living water to satisfy all our thirst.

Even more, Jesus stands ready at his well of living water, offering us the life-giving Spirit of God as a spring that wells up within us to eternal life (John 4:14).

Have you been refreshed by the water of life?

We are thirsty, Lord Jesus, for the living water that only you can provide. Fill us to overflowing with your abiding presence and steadfast love. Amen.

GOD IS ON OUR SIDE

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

—Psalm 46:1

The first words of this psalm announce its theme: God is our refuge—our fortress and shelter. God is also our strength, our help—the one who deals with the perils surrounding us. And because God is our refuge and help, we have nothing to fear, even if nature throws its worst tantrums at us.

A group of Jesus' followers feared for their lives in a storm one day, out on a boat in the middle of a huge lake. Then their Teacher stood up and said to the wind and the sea, "Quiet! Be still!" The wind quit; there was dead calm. "Who is this?" they asked. "Even the wind and the waves obey him!" (See Mark 4:35-41.)

The Lord Almighty was in that boat as their helper; the God of Jacob was their refuge.

Our faith is always being subjected to storms and earthquakes. Where can we find safety and security? Listen to Psalm 46: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way. . . ."

There is a certain and trustworthy basis for our faith—the God who made us and everything in our world. In all circumstances, no matter how terrible or frightening, our unchanging God is our refuge and strength.

In what ways has God been your refuge and strength?

Lord, we know who is God: you are. Help us to remember this when our worlds shake and our hearts tremble in fear. Shelter us, Jesus, in your strong, safe arms. Amen.

HOW COULD I HAVE DONE THAT?

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

David wrote this psalm after being convicted of great sin (see 2 Samuel 11-12). This heartfelt cry reflects his grief over his failure to God. David was seeking restoration of the most important relationship in his life, his relationship with God.

David recognized that his sin had separated him from God, so he prayed to be reconciled with God—and he counted on God's steadfast love and mercy to restore their relationship.

Grace and forgiveness are about transformation—about a willing spirit, a spirit that wants to change; and about a broken spirit, a spirit that recognizes it is totally dependent on God.

Paul talks about that transformation when he states with confidence that one thing is sure and worthy of full acceptance: "Christ Jesus came

into the world to save sinners. (1 Timothy 1:15).

There is no heart so hard, no anger so bitter, and no spirit so willful that it is beyond the reach of God's forgiveness.

What David and Paul learned is that God is committed to loving us forever. God promises to walk with us, to love and care for us, to fix our scraped knees when we fall, and to wipe away our tears. This is our merciful God—our God who loves us, no matter what.

In what ways has God shown you mercy?

"Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me." Thank you for the joy of salvation in Jesus Christ. Amen.

CROSSED ARMS

Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand? Take it from the folds of your garment and destroy them! —Psalm 74:11

The people of Israel had fallen into idolatry. God had been patient for generations, but God knew that only severe punishment and exile would turn the people away from their sins and back to him. Enemy armies were allowed to rise up and conquer the nation and sack the city of Jerusalem, destroying everything—including God's temple.

The people couldn't help wondering why God would let this happen and why God was so slow to respond to their pleas for deliverance. "How long will you hold back your hand?"

It can often seem to us that God is slow to intervene on our behalf or to respond to our needs. But what might appear slow to us is the right timing from God's perspective. It's easy for us to become impatient, but we should never give up on God or grow impatient with him.

When God seems silent and we are deep in anguish, we should follow the method in this psalm. Think about how God has acted on behalf of his people in the past and then reflect on what God has done for you. God is at work not only in history but also in your life today.

God eventually returned the people to their land; he answered their cries for help. And God will do the same for us.

Do you depend on God, asking faithfully for his help each day?

"How long, O LORD?" we ask at times—yet we know that your love sets the seasons of our lives. Give us patience to await your answers to our prayers. In Jesus, Amen.

GOD'S DWELLING PLACE

How lovely is your dwelling place, LORD Almighty!

—Psalm 84:1

The writer of this psalm is eager to be in the temple of God, and we get the sense that, for some reason, it's out of reach. In ancient Israel, the temple was the place where the believer could be renewed in faith and reconnected with God. It was God's dwelling place among his people.

This psalm reminds us of our need for a home with God. We all need holy places; we all need to be home with God.

But God doesn't dwell in a temple building any longer. In John 2:19-22 Jesus indicates that his own body is God's temple. In Jesus, of course, God came to be with us, to dwell among us (Matthew 1:23; John 1:14).

After Jesus ascended to heaven, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Jesus' followers turned us into God's temple also. Paul

explains this in 1 Corinthians 3:16 and 6:19-20. God dwells in us and among us. We are the temple of God.

God's people are in the temple-building business. On the solid rock of Jesus, we are building a home to which anyone can come to find God. That is our mission, to be the dwelling place of God.

God's temple is found in the hearts and lives of his transformed people. So, by his Spirit, we are never far from the presence of God.

Lord, thank you for living in us and making your home with us. By your Spirit in us, help us to draw others to you, that they may become your dwelling place too. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

SAFE AND SOUND

I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."
—Psalm 91:2

If you know how big and scary and difficult the world is, this psalm is for you. These are words of comfort: God is our shelter; God will cover us with his feathers spread wide, and under God's wings we will find refuge.

Birds do that by instinct; they see a threat and spread their wings, forming a canopy of protection. Their offspring run for cover and huddle there until the danger passes.

Reflecting on the relationship between God and ourselves, the psalmist says God will protect us in a way like that. We can find refuge under his wings. Surely God will shield and protect us.

But it also happens that sometimes a threat doesn't pass us by, and we don't feel protected at all.

The promise is not that pain and tragedy will magically flow around us, but that ultimately nothing can separate us from the reach of our God's arms, from his love.

We live "in the shelter of the Most High"; we rest and find comfort "in the shadow of the Almighty." We do not fear because the all-powerful God of heaven and earth is here with us, walking alongside and in front of us and behind us, as a mother hen who will never abandon her young.

We're safe in God's care, and he is always with us.

Lord God, protect and shelter us, we pray. Gather us under your wings and shield us. Be our refuge in every storm of life. In Jesus' name, Amen.

HARD HEARTS AND HARD BREAD

"Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah."

—Psalm 95:8

A hard heart is as useless as a hard loaf of bread.

At Meribah the Israelites complained to Moses because they had no water (Exodus 17:1-7). They were so convinced that God couldn't provide for them that they simply lost their faith in God.

When someone's heart becomes hardened, that person is so stubbornly set in their ways that they cannot turn to God. Hard hearts don't turn that way overnight; it is the result of a long series of choices to disregard God's will. Because that generation of Israelites persisted in stubborn disobedience, God chose not to let them enter his "rest," the land he had promised their ancestors.

What would keep people from the ultimate blessing of entering God's rest? Unthankful

hearts, to begin with. Not listening to what God calls them to do. Being stubborn about doing things their way and not God's way. Doubting that God is working in love in their lives.

In Hebrews 4:1-11, we are encouraged to enter the eternal rest that Jesus has won for us through his death and resurrection by being faithful followers of Christ.

The good news of salvation in Jesus is that there are no hearts so hard that the Holy Spirit cannot soften them. Jesus encountered many hard hearts in his teaching and preaching ministry, yet he died to offer salvation to all.

Soften our hearts, Holy Spirit, that we may hear your voice and come and worship with songs of joy. In Jesus' name, Amen.

SING A NEW SONG

Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.
—Psalm 96:12

Come and let us sing a new song—a song about the King who will establish a kingdom that will bring order and stability into our lives and our world, a kingdom that is firm and solid.

This King is none other than our God, the King of justice, righteousness, and peace. All creation sings this new song: the heavens, the earth, the sea and all its creatures, the fields and all their wildlife—even the trees catch the beat and “sing for joy.”

It shouldn't surprise us to know that the message of this psalm is the same good news proclaimed by Jesus: God reigns! “The kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15). And like the preaching of Jesus, this psalm calls for a decision; it invites us to submit to God's sovereignty, to enter the reign of

God: “Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15).

There is also a challenge to us in this psalm. The God who reigns insists on justice, righteousness, and peace in the lives of all people. God cares about how men and women live. God's people are to live faithfully, proclaiming the truth of his kingship over all even as they live in a world that would like to pretend God is not its King.

The Lord our God is King! Joy to the world—our King has come!

Joy to world, Lord Jesus,
for you came to judge the
world with truth, to bring
justice, and to reign with
righteousness everywhere.
Alleluia! Amen.

WORSHIPING AT GOD'S FOOTSTOOL

Exalt the LORD our God and worship at his footstool; he is holy.

—Psalm 99:5

When this psalm was written, each nation claimed top honors for its gods. But Israel knew who the God above all gods truly is—the Lord God Almighty.

In fact, God is so much greater than other gods that it is impossible to even see God sitting on a throne. God is so much higher than anything else in the universe that all we can catch a glimpse of is God's footstool! Holy is the Lord our God!

Yet the magnificent God, who has no human limitations, chose to do something even more magnificent. God took on our humanity to become one of us. Jesus Christ, who with God the Father and the Holy Spirit is the God above all gods, chose to humble himself so that instead of kneeling at God's footstool in awe and wonder, we could sit at his feet.

Men, women, and children were invited to gather around Jesus as he told stories about the kingdom of God, taught people how to live as true worshipers of God, and healed diseases, bruised hearts, and withered spirits.

What's more, Jesus died and rose again and ascended to heaven, where he again sits on the eternal throne. Everything is under his feet, even the last and bitterest enemy of all: death (1 Corinthians 15:25-26).

Hallelujah! Our God reigns forever and ever!

God, our Father, we kneel before the footstool of your throne and praise you. Jesus, we sit at your feet and learn from you. Spirit, by your power we have new life. Lord God, you are holy! Amen.

IT'S ALL ABOUT GOD

Praise the LORD, all his works everywhere in his dominion.

—Psalm 103:22

Did you notice how many times the word “all” occurs in this psalm? Perhaps the psalmist wants to remind us that God, who rules over all and does all good things for all people, is to be praised in all places and by all heavenly beings and all creatures and created things with all of their being!

This psalm has 22 lines—the same number of letters as in the Hebrew alphabet, the language this psalm was first written in. That suggests that the psalmist is saying all there is to be said about God.

What is this psalm about? It's all about God.

God forgives sin, heals diseases, redeems our lives, crowns us with love and mercy, satisfies us with good things—every part of our lives. Our bodies, hearts, minds, and souls are the objects

of God's actions—every part of us.

And what is our purpose? What are we all about? We are created to praise God.

Praise brings us in tune with God. It tears down the strong walls of our “self” and opens us up to closer fellowship with God. Praise lifts up our hopes and gives them substance when we remember the things God has done for us.

“Praise the LORD, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name”!

Lord God, we praise you with all of your creation for all you have done. Most of all, we praise you for sending Jesus to save all your creation from sin and death. In his name we pray. Amen.

RESCUED

Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story—those he redeemed from the hand of the foe.
—Psalm 107:2

Four dramatic stories of reversal and rescue make up the heart of this psalm. These are perilous circumstances: lost in the desert, locked up in prison, afflicted and near death, and perishing at sea. In all of these situations, God acts in powerful, life-giving ways to rescue and restore.

If we think our lives are beyond help or rescue, we are wrong. God guides us out of the desert, breaks our chains, speaks words of healing, and calms the stormy sea. We may go down, but God will always bring us back up. Whatever it takes, God can do it.

Many readers note that the stories in this psalm remind them of Jesus' ministry. Jesus comes to rescue, deliver, free, and restore. He feeds the hungry and provides living water, releases people from chains of disability and

illness, rescues people from the grave, and calms the stormy sea.

The gospel Jesus proclaims is the good news of God's steadfast love. In all that Christ does, we see God's love in action.

We may not have stories like these to tell, but we all have the story of Ephesians 2: we were dead in our sins, following the ways of this world and deserving of wrath. But even though we were unable to utter a simple cry for help, God—out of his steadfast love and mercy—rescued us through the work of Jesus Christ.

Lord, no place is too far, no problem too hard, no darkness too deep—not even death—to keep you from gathering us into your loving arms. Thank you, Jesus. Amen.

A DAY TO REJOICE

The LORD has done it this very day; let us rejoice today and be glad.

—Psalm 118:24

In this psalm we celebrate with God's people that the King has returned in triumph. With the battle won and the enemy defeated, we have been given victory over death. God's steadfast love "endures forever." Hosanna and hallelujah!

Like the psalmist, we can't wait to begin our celebration of this day that the Lord has made—a day of rescue, a day of joy, a day of power, a new day, a beginning day, a day of life and light!

For each of us, this day dawns when we come to faith in Christ, when we see all that God has done for us and we believe and trust it is true.

For Jesus' disciples it happened this way. On Sunday at dawn it seemed they faced a third day of grief, worry, alarm, fear, amazement, shock, and panic.

Their teacher and friend was dead—put to death on Friday on a cross.

But when they went to his tomb, his body was gone. Angels said he had risen! Then the stories came in: Mary meeting Jesus in the garden, Cleopas walking with him to Emmaus. And then suddenly the resurrected Lord was standing there among them! (See Luke 24.)

This is indeed a day of rescue, a day of joy, a day of power, a new day, a beginning day, a day of life and light!

Hosanna and hallelujah! Let's celebrate!

Jesus Christ, all our days are yours, for you have turned our night of mourning into our day of new life and rejoicing. Hallelujah! Amen.

SAVE US!*LORD, save us!*

—Psalm 118:25

Imagine this parade as it entered Jerusalem. A king has returned from battle; the enemy has been defeated in a victory that can only be attributed to God. Led by the king riding his horse, battle-weary troops trailed behind. Their first action on their return was to march to the temple and offer a thanksgiving sacrifice to God.

Imagine another parade into Jerusalem 800 years later. A rabbi from Galilee is riding on a donkey, followed by his weary disciples. Suddenly the crowd understands—this is a king on his way to the temple to offer a sacrifice! The dusty road is transformed into a carpet of cloaks and palm branches. The words of Psalm 118 come to everyone's lips: "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father

David!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" (Mark 11:9-10).

No one knows how this rabbi could be a king—but he is far more of a king than anyone can guess. God is going to do marvelous things through this King. A day is coming, a day the entire universe will rejoice in. Those prayers of Hosanna—"Save us!"—will be answered beyond our wildest dreams and expectations. The victory this King comes to announce is the victory over the greatest enemy of all: death.

Do you know this King as your personal Lord and Savior?

Jesus, you came to save us from sin and death. You are our God, and we give you thanks; you are our God, and we will exalt you forever. Amen.

HOW SHALL WE LIVE?

I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands.
—Psalm 119:10

Our psalmist, possibly a young person, sits in life's classroom and asks, "How shall I live? How can I be a servant of God my whole life long?"

The answer is to know and love God's wisdom. This covers the breadth, length, height, and depth of our walk with God. It takes no less than all the verses of Psalm 119 to describe it.

But this psalm is not just praising God's words; it praises the God who imparts those words. By learning Scripture's words of wisdom we also learn about the source of that wisdom. The answer includes not just what God wants us to do, but also who God wants us to be.

The words of God's law, God's guidelines for us to live by, are to be the air we breathe and the expressions on the tip of our tongue. God's wisdom is the

source of all we need to shape our lives. That's why the teaching of God is a delight—in it our hearts find hope and our souls find peace.

Our lifelong walk with God engages not just our heads but also our hearts and our feet. It's a journey that Jesus promises will not only answer the psalmist's questions but will also show us what really matters: how to love, whom to trust, how to live, and how to die.

"I am the way and the truth and the life," says Jesus. He is the Word who came to live among us (John 1:14; 14:6), and we must follow him.

Your words, Lord, are all the ABCs we need. Jesus, Word made flesh, help us to follow you faithfully, calling others to come too. Amen.

SWEETER THAN HONEY

How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!
—Psalm 119:103

We might think that only “experts” really understand the Bible, and that it takes a degree from a seminary or a training course to really be able to read it. Certainly that kind of training can help, but our young psalmist claims that he understands God’s law better than his teachers and the elders of his community. That’s quite a statement!

The truth is that God’s words are open to everyone to understand, because they are not just deep thoughts but the source of all we need to live. To know God’s wisdom is not just to memorize it but also to live the way God wants us to live. Apparently there were teachers and elders in the psalmist’s community who did not meditate faithfully on God’s Word and did not obey it.

Studying God’s Word can be as sweet as honey to our taste-

buds; life is that good when we are living the way God has called us to live.

Living God’s way is like having a flashlight so that we can walk safely on a path that would otherwise be dark and dangerous. We don’t need to fear taking wrong turns or making wrong choices when we walk in the light of God’s wisdom.

Peter once asked Jesus, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). Words of eternal life are the sweetest words of all.

Jesus, may every word we speak and learn be sweeter than honey because they are your words of eternal life. In your name we pray. Amen.

LIVING AMONG LIARS

Save me, LORD, from lying lips and from deceitful tongues.

—Psalm 120:2

This psalm is about living in the midst of relentless trouble. It begins with distress and ends with talk of war, and everything in between reveals anxiety and pain.

This psalm is the first of fifteen songs used by ancient Israelites traveling to Jerusalem (Mount Zion) for a temple festival. For many of those pilgrims it was a long and difficult journey, and yet they undertook it gladly.

This psalm provides the reason why they wanted to take that trip—to escape the violence and lies that often surrounded them. This psalm draws them toward Jerusalem and the temple, to celebrate God’s truth.

We may often be surrounded and distressed by trouble as well. When that happens, there is only one way to turn—to God. The only way to escape the lies that often surround us is

to turn to and meditate on the truth found in God’s Word.

Notice the psalmist’s firm faith despite so many troubles: “I call on the LORD in my distress, and he answers me.” God’s faithfulness is clear to the believer who calls on God and seeks to live by God’s truth. That’s what drew so many pilgrims to celebrate the Lord together. And in God’s presence they were blessed and restored.

Every time we approach God, we too are making a pilgrimage—into the presence of the one who is “the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6).

Lord, we are often weary of lies and trouble around us. Breathe your words of life into us, that we too may be restored in your presence. Amen.

A MOUNTAINTOP VIEW

I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from?
—Psalm 121:1

Every continent on earth has mountains. Some are cold, rugged, and difficult to climb. Others are favorite vacation spots. Still others are sources of water, timber, and other natural resources. Those of us who live within view of a mountain range are reminded daily of God's greatness and our smallness.

Psalm 121 asks us to consider that same contrast.

Setting out for their trip to Jerusalem for a festival, pilgrims often sang this song to remind each other of the dangers of the journey ahead and of the assurances of God's protection. God is greater than any so-called god of the hills or mountains—the Lord God is earth's Creator. God is more powerful than any force of the sun or moon—the Lord created them too. The false gods of other nations might have had to take

vacations, but not the Lord God Almighty, who never slumbers or sleeps.

Whenever we set off on a journey—whether it is a trip of hundreds of miles or only a few steps—we can remind ourselves, as those pilgrims did, that we travel with God. We need not fear the dangers of the road or threats from others; every step of our way is seen by God, who watches over us.

Our God, the Creator of earth's highest mountains and deepest valleys—and everything in between—is also the protector of our small lives.

Lord, protect us from all harm; keep watch over our lives, we pray. Watch over our coming and going today and always, in Jesus' name. Amen.

QUIET COMFORT

I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child I am content. —Psalm 131:2

So many psalms are about battles, doubts, and trouble, or about thanks, joy, and praise to God in worship. But this psalm is different, much quieter.

Instead of portraying a king celebrating a victory or a priest leading worship in the temple, this psalm pictures a young child consoled and comforted by its mother. Think of a child who fell and skinned a knee and now, having been soothed and comforted, is able to fall asleep in its mother's arms. In a way like that child, the psalmist is humble and at peace, not haughty or concerned with great matters, able to rest and trust in God's comforting care.

God's promises and care are indeed what calm and quiet our souls, like a toddler safe in the comfort of its mother's embrace. The promise here is that when I fall down and get hurt,

or even cry out my frustration in a tantrum, God will be there to pick me up and say, "There, there; it's alright."

I experience that quiet comfort when I read this psalm and picture myself in the lap of my God, soothed, comforted, and at peace like a little child.

I experience that quiet comfort when I read Jesus' words: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27).

In what ways does God comfort you?

Lord, calm our thoughts and quiet our souls. Jesus, help us to rest and be at peace with you. Amen.

A CRY FOR JUSTICE

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.
—Psalm 137:1

The words of this psalm startle us; they throb with anger and grief.

God's people have been taken captive and deported far away from home. And now their captors want them to sing. "Yes, we'll sing you a song. Listen to this one!" And they sing a psalm that no one would want to hear.

The captives' cry for justice is troubling—surely innocent children should not have to pay with their lives for what a king and an army have done!

Perhaps we are troubled by this psalm because it is so honest. There are times we may feel just as angry and eager for vengeance and justice. Perhaps voicing such thoughts and wishes in honest prayer is just what God wants us to do. Perhaps, then, God can remind

us that we should love our enemies and pray for those who hate us. Perhaps praying such a prayer helps us turn our grief over to God.

Such a prayer reminds us that it is God to whom we must turn in such a season; it is God who ultimately decides who is punished and how. It is God whose will is done, "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

Psalm 137 reminds us that God wants us to bring our every thought to him in prayer. Have you shared even your most vengeful thoughts with God?

O God, sometimes our grief and anger rage out of control. Remind us that you want to hear all our prayers—even the ugly ones. Your will be done. In Jesus' name, Amen.

HEMMED IN, KEPT SAFE?

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

There is a sense in which everything we will be and do is shaped before we are born—what kind of person we will be, our strengths and weaknesses, our abilities and talents. Because God is involved in our creation, God is also involved in every day of our life.

God is watching over every breath and every step we take. And there is nowhere we can go where God is not present.

Is this good news or bad news?

Sometimes we don't want people to get to know us too well; we're afraid they might find out something about us that we'd rather keep secret or that we think they won't like.

The good news is that God already knows everything about us—and still he accepts us and loves us. God is with us through every situation, protecting and

guiding us. He knows us completely, and that doesn't stop him from loving us completely.

The assurance for all who know and love God is that no matter what we do or where we go, no matter what happens to us—hardship, trouble, danger, persecution, disaster, war, or anything else—we can never be separated from God's comforting presence and love in Christ our Savior (Romans 8:35-39).

Do you have this assurance?

God, it can be scary to think how well you know us. And yet it's comforting to know how thoroughly you watch over and care for us. It is both fearful and wonderful. Thank you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WHAT MORE CAN WE SAY?

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

—Psalm 150:6

What a fitting way to end the psalms, with jubilant praise to God! This song is the last in a closing group of five (Ps. 146-150) that all begin and end with “Praise the LORD.”

Urging “everything that has breath” to praise God for his “acts of power” and “surpassing greatness,” this psalm celebrates the faithful Lord of all creation. So we join in with dancing and the music of all kinds of instruments to honor the almighty King of all kings.

The apostle Paul echoes this invitation, saying, “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of

the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:16-17).

As we end our season in the psalms, let us give thanks for the love of God in Christ Jesus. The Lord stands with us in all the seasons of our lives. In our joy, sadness, praise, lament, thanksgiving, and much more, God is always watching over us, holding our destiny safe in his hands. The steadfast love of the Lord “endures forever” (Psalm 118; 136). So “let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD”!

Father, we cannot stop thinking of you and your goodness. Jesus, we cannot stop praising you for redeeming us. Holy Spirit, we cannot stop being amazed at your power to renew us. To you be all glory and praise! Amen.

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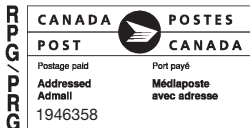
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