

A fisherman in a small boat on a sunset lake, holding a net. The scene is silhouetted against a bright, golden sunset sky with clouds. The fisherman is standing in the boat, holding a long pole with a net attached. The net is partially submerged in the water. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and red, with some dark clouds. The water is calm, reflecting the sky and the fisherman. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

Today

Jan/Feb 2016

refresh, refocus, renew

**GOD'S WORK
AND OURS**

ALSO: THIS GOD WE WORSHIP

Friends:

The sad truth is . . . I'm a terrible fisherman. I'm just too impatient. As a boy, sometimes my Dad or my cousin would take me fishing. I'd dutifully bait my hook, cast my line, and wait for the bobber to do something. But after a few minutes, I became distracted and bored, ready to move on.



Sitting and waiting is still not my gift. But I am grateful for the people who invested in me, and for those whose gifts differ from mine. And I thank the Holy Spirit for other gifts he has given me, maybe even using that impatience to spur me along in other endeavors. We each have talents from God, and from the beginning he has called us to use our gifts in glorifying him, wherever we go and whatever we do.

As we enter this new year, George Young first explores with us who God is and why he deserves our praise. What kind of God do we worship, and why should we glorify him everywhere?

Then in February, Pastor Rob Toornstra shows us how our day-to-day work matters to God. As God's imagebearers, everything we do glorifies or tarnishes God's reputation. How can we use our gifts well?

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

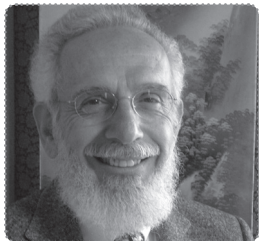
A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Steven Koster". The signature is written in dark ink on a light background.

—Steven Koster

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“This God We Worship”
George R. Young



“God’s Work and Ours”
Rob Toornstra

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ReFrame
Media

january

This God We Worship

George R. Young

At the beginning of a new year we turn to the most basic question each of us must answer: “What kind of God should we believe in, worship, and serve?” Everything in life depends on the answer to this question. And we’re surrounded by a confusing mix of responses.

Fortunately we are not left to our own imagination, or even to our own limited intelligence, to find the answer. God made himself known in history, revealing himself to the prophets of Israel, who recorded those revelations in the Bible. So we do not “construct” the kind of God we would like to believe in. Rather, we come to meet the God who is already and truly here and everywhere.

Jesus said (while praying to God the Father), “This is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3). This God we worship is the fount of eternal salvation and every blessing. Let’s learn more about him!

George Young, a native of New York City, became a Christian in junior high school through the ministry of Billy Graham. He graduated from the City College of New York, studied under Francis Schaeffer in Switzerland, and then served with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in New York City, ministering among college students. After a two-year stint as a taxi driver in New York City, he studied at and graduated from Westminster Theological Seminary and then Calvin Theological Seminary. He served as a pastor in Michigan before going to Japan as a missionary in 1982. For three years George and his wife, Ruth, studied Japanese intensively, and then for 31 years they worked with pastors of the Reformed Church of Japan to spread the gospel of Christ and to establish churches in north-eastern Japan and in the Tokyo area. In 2013 the Youngs retired to New Jersey, where they now live closer to their children and grandchildren.

THAT WE MAY SEEK HIM AND FIND HIM

“God did this so that [people] would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him.”
—Acts 17:27

London’s Hyde Park is famous for its soapbox orators, speakers who stand on a box and talk to anyone who might stop and listen. Ancient Athens had its own version of Hyde Park, a place called the Areopagus, or Mars Hill, where philosophers would speak out and debate the latest ideas.

When the apostle Paul came to Athens on his second missionary journey (about 50 A.D.), he first went to the local synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. Then he did some street preaching in the marketplace. The philosophers who heard him there invited him to say more at the Areopagus. They were curious because he seemed to be advocating a foreign god, one that was new to them. Afterward, some concluded that Paul was just a blab-

bermouth. But others believed his message and found God.

This month’s devotions are somewhat like Paul’s talks in Athens. They are addressed to many who are already familiar with the Bible, and to many for whom the Bible is not so familiar. This month we will explain who God is, based on his self-revelation recorded in the Bible. God promises that those who seek him will find him, for he has been seeking us all along. As Jesus said, “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10).

How wonderful are your words, O God: “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness” (Jeremiah 31:3). May we come to know you better through Jesus Christ. Amen.

GOD IS ONE

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one."

—Deuteronomy 6:4

Wherever my wife and I have lived, we have always nailed to the doorpost of our home a little brass case called a *mezuzah*. It was a present from a Jewish neighbor and longtime friend in our apartment building in New York City. In it, written in Hebrew on sheepskin, are the words of Deuteronomy 6. Altogether, they are called the *Shema*, after the first Hebrew word in this verse: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one."

This is one of the most basic confessions we make: the oneness of God, who revealed himself in creation, to the people of Israel, and most completely in Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). He was referring to his unity with the heavenly Father—and to their unity of purpose, their character of love, and their method of

working. "Truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing" (John 5:19).

The one true God is so different from the mythical gods of the nations around Israel. Myths are colorful tales that make for interesting reading, but one of the most obvious things about them is the quarreling and battling between various gods. They plot against and even try to kill each other.

The true God's teaching about himself, though, is simply this: "I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God" (Isaiah 45:5).

Lord, you are one; help us to understand—even if just a little—the power, simplicity, and beauty of who you are. Amen.

GOD IS SPIRIT

“God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”
—John 4:24

The Bible says that God “is immortal and . . . lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see” (1 Timothy 6:16). There will come a day when believers in Christ will see God, as Jesus said (Matthew 5:8). Until then we live by faith, not by sight.

For several centuries materialism—the idea that only physical or material things are real and of value—has been very influential. Sometimes it has taken shape in Marxist revolutions and societies; sometimes it is seen in the notion of contentment through wealth and physical comforts. Materialism is skeptical of the God who is spirit, whom no one can see.

Many people figure that if we cannot see God, he must not exist. But do we think that way about places and people we’ve heard of but haven’t seen?

Perhaps you have a cousin whom you’ve heard of but have never met, or maybe you’ve heard about black holes in space but haven’t seen them. Does that mean they don’t exist?

Another pitfall (among many) is circular reasoning. For example: “Miracles cannot happen because God does not exist.” That’s like saying, “My mind is made up; don’t bother me with any evidence.”

The Bible teaches that God exists and that his Spirit guides us “into all the truth” (John 16:13). God’s Spirit convinces us that God is real and assures us that through Jesus we are saved from the consequences of our sin and given new life. That’s why we worship him!

O God, help us to know you and to worship you in truth. In Jesus, Amen.

THE CREATOR AND HIS CREATION

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.

—Genesis 1:31

Have you ever thought about what goes into creativity? Listen to a really great song: thought-provoking words, unforgettable melody, amazing instrumental accompaniment, sung by someone with a beautiful voice. I have my favorites, and I'm sure you do too.

Next, try to write a song. Sit at a piano and plunk away. Strum a guitar. Grab a piece of paper and write down some lyrics. It's a rare person who'll come up with anything halfway worthwhile, something that is not painfully embarrassing to listen to. Thinking up something from nothing, something good, something beautiful, is not easy!

God is the Creator. God's creativity is astounding. Trying our own hand at being creative can help us not to take God's creativity for granted. Even a man and a woman's ability to bring

new life into the world is a gift from God, for "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number.'" It's closest to God's acts of creation, the wonder of which we sense when we hold a newborn baby in our arms.

Materialistic thinkers say that there was no need for a Creator, that all the wonders around us came into being simply by the natural processes of physics and chemistry. Try saying that about the sculptures of Michelangelo!

O Lord, your creativity is marvelous and matchless. Help us never to lose the sense of wonder we feel when we hold a newborn in our arms, or when we see the beauties of your creation. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE IMMENSITY OF GOD

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

—Psalm 139:7-8

Before astronauts walked on the moon, I used to wonder if God knew what the far side of the moon looked like. Now, however, I can't imagine that God is struggling to keep ahead of our space probes so that we don't surpass his knowledge of the universe. God is everywhere in the universe. Theologians call that his *omnipresence*.

The gods of many folk religions are what might be called "little gods," especially nature gods, believed to have limited areas of supervision, like a river god or a mountain god. Often they are also petty, quarrelsome beings, more powerful than we are, but no better. And of course such gods are not real.

Ancient Japanese mythology tells the story of Susa, the storm god, who was a mischievous guy. One day he sneaked behind the throne of his sister,

Ama Terasu, the sun goddess, and "relieved himself" there. Disgusted, she stalked off to a cave and refused to come out. Of course, the farmers were in trouble when the sun didn't shine; they begged her to come out. When she did, everyone was happy again.

The true God is not little or petty. "How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!" says the psalmist. The Lord is the great and good and awesome God.

Lord, we easily fall into making idolgods in our own image. Help us not to diminish you by the limitations of our understanding. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

THE INFINITE, PERSONAL GOD

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

After he flung the galaxies into the universe; after he created the sun, earth, and moon, the sea, dry land, plants, and animals, God made humankind. God made us like himself in many ways—in his image. He gave us a soul/spirit and a physical body. Each of us has a heart, a mind, a personality, and power to rule the earth and to make it fruitful and beautiful. We each have inalienable dignity, something that cannot be taken from us, because we are made in the image of God.

We may suffer terribly, be tortured, or be thrown into a prison, but we are still in the image of God our Creator, awesome beings. In our fallen state we may have committed crimes, but the image of God we bear still glimmers within and calls us to repentance. It also demands that we be given

a fair trial and not be treated inhumanely.

God's infinite and personal nature showed itself when the Creator walked and talked with Adam and Eve in the garden. It showed itself when God came to Abraham as a traveler and ate lunch with him. God desires to be our friend because he is personal. At the same time God is infinitely powerful, the Master of the universe who created it all by his word.

What an amazing God we serve! So great—and yet he loves each one of us personally!

God our Creator, we sing with the hymn writer, "Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to thee: . . . how great thou art!" And to think that you love each one of us too! Amen.

GOD'S ETERNAL NAME

God said to Moses, ". . . Say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you. . . This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation.'"

—Exodus 3:14-15

By the grace of God, I have survived many earthquakes. Once, I remember, the earth throbbed as the rocks below us ground against each other. Another time, it felt as if a freight train had slammed into our house. The most terrifying times are when earthquakes come in the dark of night and the house sways and groans; you don't know whether it will collapse and bury you. Once, in a half-awake state, I dreamed that dinosaurs were attacking the house as it shook, and in terror I huddled against my wife, trembling. It was reassuring to read Psalm 46:1-2: "God is our refuge and strength Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea."

Francis Schaeffer, a missionary in Europe a few decades ago, called the God who revealed

himself in the Bible "The God Who Is There." That perfectly describes the eternal name of God: I AM. Not only does God exist, but he is also there, and we are saved by his love poured out among us. When the people of Israel were in misery, enslaved by Pharaoh, God let Moses know he had heard their cries for help; he cared about them in their suffering and had come to rescue them. It was then that he revealed his eternal name: I AM.

O God, you are an ever-present help in times of trouble. Thank you that you are not a figment of wishful thinking but that you have existed from all eternity and are mighty to save. Amen.

GOD ALONE IS GOOD

"No one is good—except God alone."

—Mark 10:18

When our children were small, we taught them a simple prayer to say before meals: "God is great. God is good. Now we thank him for our food. By his hand we all are fed. Give us this day our daily bread." Early in life it's valuable to learn about God's goodness.

As a boy, I loved the story of *Heidi* by Johanna Spyri. Heidi was an orphan who lived with her embittered grandfather, a hermit, high in the Alps. The Alm-Uncle, he was called. He avoided everyone, and everyone avoided him. But Heidi's gentle goodness changed the Alm-Uncle, and he learned to put his bitter past behind him.

Growing up, I found that I was a mixture of both good and bad, as we all are. As Paul says, "I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out" (Romans 7:18). I tried to be

good, but sometimes I was untruthful, rebellious, disobedient, self-centered, lustful, and lazy.

When I came to know that God is totally good—unmixed with evil—and that through Christ I could be forgiven and live a life of peace with the great and good God, my heart overflowed with joy.

It's important for each of us to acknowledge the evil in our lives. But it's equally important to know that God forgives our evil tendencies and restores us to himself through faith in Jesus Christ. Have you experienced that forgiveness?

How good it is, O God,
that you are purely good,
that in you there is no evil.
How happy we are to rest
in your forgiveness and
to find peace with you.
Thank you. Amen.

THE GOD WHO MAKES HIMSELF KNOWN

As [Saul] neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice. . . .

—Acts 9:3

In a mystical scene in *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*, Luke Skywalker is learning to get in touch with the Force, training under the little Jedi master Yoda. The Force, it seems, is not a personal being, and it has a dark side as well as a bright side. Using the Force requires supreme concentration, and Luke is able to float upside down in the air until he is distracted for a moment and comes crashing down.

Our infinite personal God is quite different from the Force, which of course isn't real. We do not have to go through yoga-like training, as if to work ourselves into a deep state of mystic concentration to get in touch with our better side, or whatever you want to call it. God is there, and although we cannot see him, he made us like himself, for fellowship with himself. Jesus said (in prayer to

God the Father), "This is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3). God takes the initiative and reveals himself, sometimes even to those like Saul, who hated him.

To grow to know God, however, calls for repentance and humility. "For this is what the high and exalted One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy: 'I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit'" (Isaiah 57:15).

We kneel before you,
awesome and holy God.
Receive us and teach us
to know you, we pray. In
Jesus' name, Amen.

THE WORD OF GOD

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
—John 1:1

John 1:1 consciously echoes Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” But the beginning spoken of by John came before the beginning spoken of by Genesis. We know this because every created thing was created by the Word, who was with God from eternity. This is a great mystery, and we must approach it slowly and humbly.

The Word of God existed long before Jesus became a human being. Jesus of Nazareth was truly a man, walking and talking in our midst. But he was also truly God.

As deep a mystery as this is, it is not meant to confuse us. That’s because Jesus Christ, the Word of God, came as God’s communication, the clearest revelation from God there ever was. If we want to understand this God whom we worship, we must

listen to Christ. When you want to understand someone, you listen carefully to what they say. Hebrews 1:1-3 says, “In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets . . . but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son . . . through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.”

May we listen carefully today, that we may know him.

Thank you, Lord, for speaking so clearly to us through the Word who became flesh: Christ the Creator, Christ the Savior, Christ the Judge of all humankind. May we meet him today, that we may be ready to meet him on the last day. Amen.

GOD, WHO IS GRACIOUS AND MERCIFUL

"You did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God."
—Nehemiah 9:31

History is full of powerful rulers with hearts of stone. Tamerlane rampaged across Asia during the 14th century, leaving towers built of the bleached bones of people he had massacred. Stalin consolidated his power in the Soviet Union by a reign of terror, unrestrained by the most elementary laws of morality. Hitler's holocaust stands as a symbol of maniacal cruelty, eliminating millions of Jews and people of other "inferior races." Mao Tse Tung declared that he wouldn't care if half the population of China died to establish a communist state, and tens of millions died in the process.

The fact that God is almighty doesn't automatically make him worthy of worship. But the tenderness, mercy, and love of God, together with his almighty power, lead us to worship him.

Objectors often say that if God were almighty and perfectly good, he never would have allowed evil to enter the world. Of course, if we were privy to every aspect of God's plan before creation, we might be able to give some kind of answer, but we weren't. Still, look at how patient God was with the Israel, though they sinned again and again, and how merciful and forgiving he has been to us in Christ. God is loving, not cruel, in the exercise of his almighty power. That should lead us to trust him, even though we can't understand everything about the problem of evil.

Almighty and merciful God, full of love toward undeserving sinners, teach us to trust you even though we don't have all the answers to our questions. Amen.

COMING TO KNOW THIS GOD

Naaman . . . said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel."

—2 Kings 5:15

Naaman was commander-in-chief of the army of Aram (ancient Syria), to the northeast of Israel. He was a powerful, wealthy man, used to getting his way. But in one respect he was powerless: he had leprosy, for which there was no cure in those days.

Through a young girl captured from Israel he heard about the godly prophet Elisha, went to him, and was healed. But it was a humbling experience: Naaman had to rein in his anger, put aside the mumbo-jumbo magic he was used to, and submit to Elisha's simple directions to wash seven times in the dirty Jordan River.

The difficulty of Naaman's conversion shouldn't be overlooked. Naaman was used to going into the temple of Rimmon, Aram's god of war, and before Naaman was healed by the true God,

he believed that Rimmon gave him victory in battle. To come to the point of understanding that "there is no God in all the world except in Israel" meant that Naaman had to put aside his nationalistic pride and look in faith to the God of Aram's weak enemy, Israel.

Naaman could have just added one more god to his long list of gods. It would have cost him nothing to do so. But God is not satisfied with such worship; nor was Naaman any longer, now that he had come to know the living God.

Do you know this God too?

Lord, move mightily in the world today, that by your Spirit we may come to know you, the only living God. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WORTHY OF GLORY, HONOR, AND POWER

“You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.”

—Revelation 4:11

God isn't only our Creator; he is also the Sustainer of our being. God is faithfully involved in keeping everything going that he started in the beginning.

Some of us were raised in a family with parents who cared for us every day. Our mother may have done the laundry, made the meals, read stories to us, and tucked us in at night. Our father may have assisted in those tasks, and together they guided us through the confusing changes of adolescence and upheld the family as a loving team. How worthy of praise they are, and how blessed by God.

Some families may not have had the same experiences. But still they have enjoyed blessing, as Psalm 68:5 indicates, for God is “a father to the fatherless, a defender of widows.”

Recently a new type of literature for young people has appeared, putting ancient mythical gods in a modern setting. *The Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan, for example, tells of Perseus, whose father, Poseidon, left his girlfriend in the lurch to raise their child as a single mother in Manhattan. This mythical Poseidon was not worthy of glory and honor, not worthy to be entrusted with power.

How wonderful to know that God, our faithful Father, loves and upholds us daily. He never lets us down.

How strong and steady, how honorable and trustworthy you are, O Lord! We live each day surrounded by your love. How can we thank you? Amen.

HOLY

*"Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."
—Isaiah 6:3*

Christians often sing the hymn "Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!" The melody we sing was written by John B. Dykes in 1861, but the words were first sung by seraphim, an awesome type of angelic being, around 740 B.C.

In a vision Isaiah the prophet saw seraphim flying above the throne of God. Each seraph had six wings! With two wings they covered their faces, with two their feet, and with two they flew. They sang God's praises, which we continue to sing today.

Their theme was the holiness of God. Holiness is not the same as goodness. Holiness is separation from all that is evil. God's holiness stands in utter contrast to the corruption that is all around us and within us. And, says the Bible, "Your iniquities have separated you from your God" (Isaiah 59:2).

So when Isaiah saw the Lord in all his holiness, he cried out, "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." But one of the seraphim flew to him with a live coal from the altar, touched his mouth and said, "Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." That scene points forward to the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, which takes away our sin and brings us forgiveness and peace with God. Do you know this Savior?

Sometimes, Lord, we don't even know enough to tremble before your holiness. Teach us to honor you and to repent, and then flood our souls with relief and joy in the salvation you offer us in Christ. Amen.

THE SON OF GOD

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." —Luke 1:35

When Muhammad rejected the idolatry of the Arabian tribes of his day, he also rejected the idea that Jesus was the Son of God. The Qur'an says, "He is the Creator of the heavens and the earth. How could He have a son when He has no consort?" The Qur'an also says, "God forbid that He should have a son! He is all that the heavens and the earth contain."

Muhammad's concern that God not be like the gods of mythology is praiseworthy. But he misunderstood the birth of Jesus. According to the Bible, Mary was not a girlfriend of God.

The overshadowing of Mary by the Holy Spirit was not a sexual relationship. It was like the Spirit hovering over the waters in Genesis 1 to bring life where there was none. It was like the Holy Spirit being poured out on the disciples on the day of

Pentecost to give them power to be his witnesses.

The Son of God, the infinite personal God who took on human flesh, was foretold in the Old Testament. To refuse God that option leaves people with a god who might be called compassionate and all-sufficient but would be distant and hard to know.

Do you have a personal relationship with the true, amazing God?

Thank you, almighty and merciful God, for becoming our Savior. Your plan of salvation never ceases to amaze and surprise us. In Christ's name, Amen.

THE WORD BECAME FLESH

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

—John 1:14

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” In the original Greek text, John uses a word here that literally means “he pitched his tent among us.”

That word picture reminds God’s people of the time after God freed Israel from Egypt and they traveled through the wilderness. Wherever they went, the tent of God was in their midst. During the day God’s glory stood over the tent like a pillar of cloud, and at night it glowed as a pillar of fire. God lived among his people, giving them water to drink and food to eat.

That’s what it was like when Jesus lived among us. As God in human flesh, we saw his glory in everything he did. He healed the sick, raised the dead, fed great crowds from a little boy’s lunch, and sat at table with sinners like you and me.

The danger with his becoming a Jew from a dusty little village in Galilee was that someone might think it all too strange. “Why a carpenter? Why a non-descript town like Nazareth?” The wonder of it all is that the infinite personal God came into view so clearly in the life of Jesus. Through faith in him we come to know God, becoming children of God, having his Spirit live in our hearts. Do you have this faith?

Keep us, O God, from stumbling over the simplicity of your plan of salvation. Give us, instead of worldly sophistication, the trusting faith of a child, that we may open our hearts and believe in Jesus. Amen.

AGAIN, "I AM"

"Very truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!"
—John 8:58

Jesus made some astonishing claims in this conversation with the Pharisees. He said, "If you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed die in your sins" (John 8:24). They argued with him and even said, "Who do you think you are?" And he eventually made the most astonishing claim of all: "Before Abraham was born, *I am*."

Someone might think Jesus' grammar wasn't so good, that he should have said, "Before Abraham was born, *I was*." Even that would have been astonishing, for Abraham lived about 2,000 years before Christ. By that reckoning, Jesus would have been claiming to be more than 2,000 years old!

But the Jews with whom Jesus was speaking knew he was not making a grammatical mistake. He meant to use the present tense, because he was referring

to the eternal name of God revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14): "I AM WHO I AM." This Jesus of Nazareth was claiming to be the eternal God, whose name is I AM. And his opponents did not like that, because Jesus had called them hypocrites many times. And if he was really God, they would have to repent. So, rather than repent, they tried to stone him for blasphemy.

Don't let anyone tell you that Jesus never claimed to be God. He did, and his miracles and resurrection backed up his claims.

Eternal God, thank you for coming to us in our distress in order to save us in Christ, the great I AM. In his name we pray. Amen.

THE CRUCIFIED ONE

When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left.

—Luke 23:33

Thank God if you were surrounded by love as you grew up, nurtured and trained to know right from wrong and to resist sin. There's a rough world out there, where Jesus fell into the hands of wicked people.

There came a day when I had to go out into the world to find a job. For two years I drove a cab in New York City. Early each morning I sat in the dispatching room of the fleet, waiting with other men to be assigned a taxi, to beat the streets all day and earn a meager living. The room was thick with cigar smoke. Men discussed the horses from the betting sheets. Smutty magazines circulated freely; coarse language sprinkled the conversations. By and large, it was a rough crew.

But that was nothing compared to the setting at Jesus' crucifixion: he was stripped naked,

beaten, mocked, and spat on; soldiers gambled for his clothes; he was nailed to a cross, crucified between criminals, and his dead body was mutilated with a spear thrust to the heart.

Crucifixion was a cursed death reserved for the worst of criminals. In awesome humility and love, the Son of God descended to the lowest depths, was treated like the scum of the earth, carried the punishment of our sin, and took our place to save us. Do you know that he died for you too?

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for humbling yourself to be handed over to wicked people and crucified. Save us and lead us to eternal life, we pray. Amen.

THE GOD WHO ESTABLISHES JUSTICE

"My servant . . . will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth."
—Isaiah 42:1-4

Martin Luther King's birthday is an important civil holiday in the United States. I think most countries today are not sure whether they are making progress or slipping backwards in establishing a just society. But we must not give up the struggle, and we must always keep our eyes on the goal, as Martin Luther King did. In this he was a servant of the Lord.

Back in 1917, there were many who hoped the Russian Revolution and the new Soviet Union would usher in a just society. But, as the author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn showed, there was endless infighting and bloodshed between various factions to gain power for their interpretation of communism. Finally, in 1991, the dream of a just Soviet society through communism died, exhausted, no closer to the goal.

No one should gloat over communism's failure. It is a difficult, discouraging struggle to try to establish justice under any form of government. The words of Isaiah 26:18 tell the sad story: "We were with child, we writhed in labor, but we gave birth to wind. We have not brought salvation to the earth."

Let's hope we've learned not to sneer at the Bible's promise of a new heaven and new earth, as the communists did. The true Servant of the Lord "will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth."

In everyday life and in political life, O Lord, give us courage, strength, wisdom, and hope as we strive for justice. May we act like Christ and long for his coming. Amen.

THE LOVE OF GOD

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

—John 3:16

A Japanese pastor with whom I worked for many years graduated from a Buddhist university before becoming a Christian. He didn't like it when people spoke ignorantly about Buddhism, for there are many varieties of thought within it. One thing I remember him saying was that the all-encompassing love of God is different from the compassion of Buddha.

Buddha taught that passionately held feelings, whether “good” or “bad”—hatred, greed, the desire to maintain self-identity, patriotism, even love—lead inevitably to suffering. But by meditating and rejecting such passions, he taught, we can achieve enlightenment. At the same time, Buddha took a vow that he would not enter Nirvana until the whole world achieved enlightenment. So he is called the Compassionate Buddha.

Indeed, the love of God led to suffering. The Suffering Servant of God, prophesied in Isaiah, did not reject suffering to maintain his serenity. When John 3:16 says that “God so loved the world,” it's saying that God loved the world so much that he didn't turn away from suffering—even the cursed suffering of the death of his Son on a cross—and neither did Jesus turn away, but died willingly—to save us. Have you experienced that love?

Teach us, O Lord, how to love you and to love others, as you have loved us. In your name we pray. Amen.

CHRIST LIVING IN OUR HEARTS

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.
—Ephesians 3:16-17

Some people say Billy Graham oversimplified the gospel into a formula that doesn't do justice to the message of the Bible. I'm of the opposite opinion.

The message of repentance, believing that Jesus bore the punishment for our sin, the necessity of a clear-cut decision to accept Christ, and being born again by the Holy Spirit, is a brilliant summary of the message of salvation, and it is totally true to the Bible. It made the Bible understandable to me, whereas earlier I couldn't grasp its central idea. Reading Billy Graham's *Peace with God* became the turning point of my life. Certainly there are biblical themes he doesn't touch on, but salvation was, for me, the key that opened the lock.

Salvation has been called "the scarlet thread," a theme in the tapestry of the Bible that runs

from beginning to end. "Being saved" isn't an odd idea left over from the days of backwoods revival meetings. "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith," says Paul in Ephesians 2:8.

People the world over have built temples for their gods. But, as Paul said to the people of Athens, "The Lord of heaven and earth . . . does not live in temples built by human hands" (Acts 17:24). Christ comes to dwell in our hearts through faith, and we are saved, born again to a new life.

We give overflowing thanks to you, O God, that we may know you because Christ saved us and dwells in our hearts. In his name, Amen.

“I WILL BETROTH YOU TO ME FOREVER”

“I will betroth you to me forever... in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the LORD.”

—Hosea 2:19-20

Marriage ceremonies used to contain the vow “I pledge you my troth.” The words would be considered quaint today, but it was a way of making a solemn pledge of unflinching love and loyalty. In more modern English we would say, “I will be true to you.”

The Bible often describes God’s relationship with believers in terms of the loving relationship of marriage. In the Ten Commandments he says, “I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God” (Exodus 20:5). That may sound strange, because often people think of jealousy as bad. But jealousy is not the same as envy. Envy doesn’t like it when other people have good things, and jealousy is about protecting things that belong to you. Jealousy can sometimes be distorted, but basically it is a sign of a burning love that rejects betrayal. In marriage, the bridal

couple promise “to forsake all others” and be true to each other.

This God we worship loves us so much that he was willing to give his life for us. His love is forever. It is not here today and gone tomorrow.

In return, we must love God with our whole heart and soul and mind (see Matthew 22:37). It must be a total commitment. How could we run after other gods and leave the God who loves us so much?

Lord, you sought us with deepest love when we did not care for you! When you speak tenderly to us, soften our hearts, that we may love you in return. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

THE LION WHO IS A LAMB

“See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed.” . . . Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain. . . .
—Revelation 5:5-6

When Jacob the patriarch was an old man, he gathered his twelve sons together and gave each one a blessing—and in some cases a warning. Interestingly, he compared several of his sons to animals that fit their character: Judah, a lion no one would dare to rouse; Issachar, a stubborn donkey; Dan, a snake waiting to strike; Naphtali, a doe that bears beautiful fawns; and Benjamin, a ravenous wolf (see Genesis 49).

Moved by the Spirit of God, Jacob also prophesied that the Messiah would be born of the tribe of Judah: “The scepter will not depart from Judah . . . until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his” (Genesis 49:10). So the Messiah came to be called “The Lion of the tribe of Judah.”

But Jesus the Messiah was also likened to a lamb. John the Baptist said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). Jesus was a sacrificial lamb, whose blood would take away the sins of people from all nations. And people from all nations would learn to obey him.

When Jesus, in anger, drove the moneychangers from the temple, he was a lion. When he hung, uncomplaining, on the cross, he was a lamb. What a perfect union of opposites in our Lord—and yet without contradiction!

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for ruling as a lion and for suffering, in our place, as a lamb. You cover all the bases for us, and we praise your name. Amen.

THE WRATH OF GOD

He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

—Revelation 19:15-16

Julia Ward Howe had Revelation 19 in mind when she wrote “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” during the American Civil War: “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord: He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.” Abraham Lincoln, reflecting on the terrible bloodshed of that war, which he hoped would purge the guilt of 250 years of slavery, quoted Psalm 19:9 (KJV), “The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.”

God does not just look the other way when there is a holocaust or people are enslaved. In the same way, when you and I sin, God does not just blandly smile.

It may sound crazy, but we should be glad that God is angry with sin. Man’s anger usually causes more trouble; God’s anger burns away evil.

The Bible holds forth the love and mercy of God in one hand, and the wrath of God in the other. At the cross, where the love and wrath of God meet, Christ saves us from the punishment we deserve. Jesus paid the price for us! “Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him!” (Romans 5:9).

We know, O God, that your hatred of evil is what restrains wickedness in this world, and that you will finally destroy it. Thank you for finding a way to judge sin without destroying us. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

THE GENTLE AND HUMBLE GOD

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart.”
—Matthew 11:28-29

In the early church a man named Marcion pitted the “God of the Old Testament” against Jesus, the “God of the New Testament.” He said that the Old Testament God was fierce and demanding and that the New Testament Jesus was merciful, loving, and gentle. The church rightly rejected that idea as a contradiction of the Bible’s teaching.

In recent times, the reverse has taken place. Among people who want rapid social change, the gentleness of Jesus is treated with scorn, as if he were a weakling, easily used by the corrupt establishment.

The Bible teaches that God is both. He is full of wrath against evil, unconvinced by lame excuses, demanding justice and goodness. At the same time he is gentle, humble, and mild toward all who become his

disciples, because he empathizes “with our weaknesses” (Hebrews 4:15). “Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (Hebrews 2:18). He is the perfect Teacher for us, if we take his yoke on our shoulders to learn how to be godly.

We have a lot to learn from this God we worship, for we often tend to be angry when we should be gentle, and gentle when we should be fierce enemies of evil.

Teach us, Lord Jesus. Put your yoke on our shoulders, that we may learn from you. Help us to be gentle when situations call for it, and fierce to fight against evil. Amen.

THE GOD WHO DOES NOT FORGET US

“Can a mother . . . have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.” —Isaiah 49:15-16

One of our deepest fears is that we will be forgotten after we die. Psalm 103:15-16 says, “The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.”

I fondly remember my father’s dry humor and my mother’s steadiness at her humble job. But none of my grandchildren ever met them, and in spite of the jokes and sayings of my parents that I repeat, I know that their memory will one day pass away.

Some people speak of a sense of “cosmic loneliness” in the universe: that a person’s longing for meaning is lost in the cold vastness of space. But that would only be the case if there were no God. The Bible promises that our lives are not meaningless, that we are dear in

God’s sight, that the grave is not the end.

What’s more, Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me” (John 10:14). If the Savior knows our name, we are certainly loved; life is not meaningless.

God said through the prophet Isaiah, “I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.” Here, surely, is a prophecy of the nail prints on Jesus’ palms! (See John 20:25-28.)

When we are afraid, O Lord, help us to remember your love and to hold fast to your promises. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

HE CARES ABOUT YOU AND ME

As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

—Luke 7:38

We are not told how this woman started down the path of sin. But we do know, from experience, how easily sin can gain a foothold in our own lives.

This woman's tears tell us that she feels remorse for what she has done in her life. She isn't brazen, with a defiant look in her eyes.

The Pharisee, on the other hand, is a religious person with an excellent reputation. He likely thinks that his own life is pretty much in order. If he worries about his sins at all, he considers them minor blemishes.

He entertains Jesus with a respectful, but decidedly cool, attitude. There is curiosity on his part, but it teeters on the brink of being outraged by Jesus' words. He and the others wonder who this man is who claims even to forgive sins.

Jesus is the center of this story. He sees the sinful woman's tears and knows that she is truly repentant. He receives her outpouring of perfume and her humble kisses to his feet. They are a sign that she seeks mercy and forgiveness.

Christ accepts all who come to him in repentance and faith, even sinners whom others whisper about and despise. He cares about people whom no one else cares about.

He cares about you and me!

God, be merciful to me, a sinner. Forgive my sins, and save me because of what Jesus did on the cross. Amen.

GOD OF THE LOWLY

God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things . . . so that no one may boast. . . . —1 Corinthians 1:28-29

Though I went to a public elementary school, in those days the principal would sometimes read a psalm at school-wide gatherings in the auditorium. Things have changed since then. We hear reports that in France anything openly religious is forbidden in school: Muslim students cannot wear a head scarf, and Christian students cannot wear a cross.

It seems that the most influential forces in North American society have seized on the concept of not favoring one religion over another, and have escalated into a crusade to erase all signs of religion among us. As people “push the envelope,” moral principles are called into question. Recently the news reported, without hint of negative comment, that a woman applied for a license to marry her own father. It is also reported

that in one city there are public celebrations in favor of sadism (taking delight in inflicting pain on others).

Such trends are not surprising. Paul says that “not many . . . influential” people responded to Christ, that “God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things . . . so that no one may boast before him.” It would seem that many university professors, newspaper editors, well-placed politicians—people with pride of place and accomplishment—suppress their desperate need for forgiveness of sin. But no matter our status in life, we all need Jesus.

Father, we are thankful that you love and accept us. Give us humility, and show us our need. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

GOD IS LOVE

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. . . . God is love. . . . We love because he first loved us.

—1 John 4:7, 16, 19

Many people are deeply impressed by the Bible's teaching that "God is love." However, we must keep in mind that God is not just a force, or even just a concept. He is the infinite, personal God, whose very character is best described as selfless love.

The ancient world had its goddesses of love who inspired romance. But the Bible's teaching about the love of God is far different. It is seen most clearly in the love of Christ, which led him to die on the cross for our salvation. The self-sacrificing love of Mother Teresa among the poorest of the poor in Calcutta came from God's love too. The beauty and glory of the universe itself is also an expression of God's love.

By its very nature, love calls for a response. This is true in romantic love and in the love of parents for their children. A

person will either love in return, or reject the love shown.

Such is the case with the love of God. Jesus said, "How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing" (Matthew 23:37).

One cannot expect to reject the love of God and still receive the blessings of salvation. What will your response be?

God, your love is unimaginably great! O Lord, let our hearts and our lives proclaim your love in everything we do. In Jesus' name, Amen.

GOD'S WISDOM

God made the earth by his power; he founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding.

—Jeremiah 10:12

Some people have said that today we have lots of information but little wisdom. The Internet is full of celebrity scandals and hints about ways to lose unwanted fat. But when it comes to issues like untangling the confusion of life or achieving peace in the Middle East, we are at a loss. Such wisdom is beyond us.

Francis Collins is a researcher in the Human Genome Project. He helped map the DNA code that determines the characteristics of our bodies. Collins has called DNA a part of the language of God. God speaks to us through the wisdom by which he created us, the world and the universe.

And yet you don't have to be a scientist to glimpse the wisdom of God. Jesus said, "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never

enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). Sadly, many who are considered wise in this world have rejected the wisdom of God.

God gave Solomon wisdom, enabling him to see through lies and deception. The wisdom of Jesus that cut through religious hypocrisy while still leading his followers to God makes us think hard, for our understanding is slow. But don't be discouraged. "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you" (James 1:5).

Lord, give us ears to hear and eyes to see your wisdom. Make us teachable, that we may have wisdom from you to cope with the issues of life. Amen.

CHILDREN OF GOD

To all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. —John 1:12

Homer, the ancient Greek poet, tells the story of Odysseus, conqueror of Troy. After twenty years of war, shipwreck, and wandering, Odysseus returned to his home in Ithaca only to find that a host of rude, unworthy men were making themselves at home on his own property, trying to pressure his wife to marry one of them. The hero came into his own hall disguised as a ragged beggar to check things out, but he was received with blows and insults by the suitors. Later he returned, not as a beggar, but with a bow and a quiver full of arrows.

Odysseus's story is similar to Jesus' story: Jesus "was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not re-

ceive him." There was no guest room available in Bethlehem, so the Lord of glory was born in a stable. The young teacher from Nazareth tested the hearts of many as he healed the sick, raised the dead, and preached the kingdom of God. Society's respected leaders connived to kill Jesus, but many who were despised and lowly loved and believed in him. He still tests people's hearts today.

"To all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."

"Test me, LORD, and try me, examine my heart and my mind" (Psalm 26:2). Crack open my stony heart to receive Christ, that I may have the privilege of becoming your child. Amen.

february

God's Work and Ours

Rob Toornstra

Most of us will spend about a third of our life working. Some of us take care of children, some of us paint houses, some of us examine patients, and some of us teach math. We invest, we invent, we create, we build, we maintain, and we cultivate.

Does our work matter to God? Throughout the month of February, we will explore what the Bible says about work. We will reflect on passages that show how our work mirrors God's work, and we will look at texts that reveal how sin damages our work. We will also experience how salvation through Jesus gives us a new approach and a new hope for the work we do. Most important, we will recognize that our work has immense significance in God's eyes!

Rob Toornstra has served as a pastor in Salem, Oregon, for over nine years. He recently completed a doctoral thesis on the topic of work and preaching. When not busy with his work, he enjoys spending time with his wife, Amy, and their three children. As a family, they find joy in cooking, geocaching, and traveling.

THE FIRST DAY OF WORK

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

—Genesis 1:1

I was eating lunch with a group of business owners, pastors, and other professionals when a middle-aged man shared his story with us. For over twenty years he had managed his own business, nurturing his company from little more than an idea into a successful venture. Sadly, he went on to explain that the only time his church ever showed interest in his work was when they needed him to write a check.

We spend as much as a third of our life working. We teach children, manage financial portfolios, invent technology, paint portraits, fill cavities, and much more! Does it matter? Of course. And we can be sure it matters especially to God.

We are going to spend this month exploring what the Bible says about work, beginning with the first worker: God himself! Already on the first page

of Scripture God shows up as a worker. Out of nothing, God creates *everything*. He not only speaks the world into existence; he arranges it. Like a contractor preparing a worksite, God separates earth and sky, water and dry land. Like a physicist, he sets the stars, sun, and moon perfectly in motion. Like a sculptor, God forms all manner of living creatures. And then, each day, God blesses the work of his hands!

In our everyday work, we follow the pattern of the greatest worker, who is well-pleased with his labor—and ours!

Creator God, we marvel at the work of your hands. You are the great architect, artist, builder, farmer, and more! Teach us to do our work well, to honor you in all we do. Amen.

MADE TO WORK

God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. —Genesis 1:27

I have a photo of a friend pushing his lawnmower across his lawn. He was doing his best to make sure each row lined up with the previous one. The highlight of the snapshot, however, wasn't my friend. In the foreground his young son was pushing a toy lawnmower, working just as hard and just as focused, navigating his mower in the pattern of his father.

Genesis 1 tells us about God, the very first worker, who labors joyfully to build the world from nothing. And on the sixth day of creation comes the pinnacle of God's creative work as he designs human beings. Men and women stand apart in creation as the only creatures fashioned in God's image. We reflect God, patterning him in our ability to reason, to feel, to love—and, yes, to work.

Immediately after we are told that God made humans in his image, we find that God commissioned them to work—to govern the world, to care for it, and to draw out its full potential.

To work is to reflect the image of God by continuing the work he began! When you write poetry, invest in a business startup, care for children, study microscopic organisms, or push a vacuum cleaner, you are reflecting God's image—and there is no higher calling than to use your gifts to glorify God.

Thank you, God, for creating us in your image as workers. Help us to pattern our work after yours. Show us what it means to follow in your footsteps as we serve you in our work. Amen.

THE CURSE ON WORK

“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life.” —Genesis 3:17

While talking with a farmer recently, I asked how his work was going. He paused briefly and responded, “I’m tired.” He enjoys his work, but after twenty years of cultivating the land, he is growing weary.

God created us in his image and put us to work, cultivating the potential of the earth. Yet this lofty task can drain us. Some of our colleagues may be difficult to get along with. Some employers and employees don’t follow through on what they promise to do. We might repeat the same menial tasks day after day.

Our reading today helps us make sense of why work is afflicted with stress, strain, and adversity. Adam and Eve rejected God’s authority in favor of their own. By pronouncing a curse on them, God named what had taken place through their rebellion: Adam and Eve

had separated themselves from God and had driven a wedge between God and all aspects of creation. The thorns of sin would now distort and damage every aspect of work. And until Jesus’ work of redemption is fully realized, our efforts will be frustrated by the effects of sin.

In the coming days, we will meditate on some of the specific ways sin distorts our work. But we’ll do so in hope, for when God pronounced a curse because of sin, he also vowed that someday Someone would come to carry the burden of that curse.

Merciful God, we lament the way sin distorts our work. We confess that we have not always done our work in a way that pleases you. Forgive us, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

BECAUSE OF SIN, WORK BECOMES SELFISH

“Come, let us . . . make a name for ourselves. . . .”

—Genesis 11:4

Why are you working? For some, work brings the allure of recognition or fame. We close the sale, run for office, or excel in sports, craving recognition and importance. Somewhere along the line, we began to hope that our accomplishments would give us a sense of significance and value. But things rarely work out that way.

The people of Shinar were hard-working and innovative. In the spirit of God’s mission of work, they improved the technology of the day, allowing them to bake bricks that were more durable, and to use tar that formed a more effective bond between the bricks. As a result, the possibility for developing creation increased. Sadly, rather than using this technology for God’s glory, they worked to establish their own reputation in the world.

Work turned into a pursuit of self-centered glory. God was not pleased. He visited their construction site and frustrated their self-centered plans.

Why are you working? The apostle Paul advises, “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). This is not only good advice; it is the pattern of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who glorified his Father, even at great personal cost. Let’s strive to do our work for God’s glory instead of our own.

Lord Jesus, you showed us the true cost and the true beauty of working for the glory of your heavenly Father. May we aim to glorify you in all our work. Amen.

WHEN WORK APPEARS MEANINGLESS

What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun?
—Ecclesiastes 2:22

In a favorite movie of mine, the lead character counts down the final minutes of the workday on the last day of his career. As soon as the minute hand ticks five o'clock p.m., he gathers up his briefcase and turns out the light in his office for the last time. After forty years as an insurance actuary, he has finally retired. But rather than enjoy the new freedom he has, he begins to wonder if his decades of labor had any meaning.

The writer of Ecclesiastes confronts us with a similar question: *What meaning does our work have?* In a fallen world, sin distorts our work so that it often lacks the purpose God intends for it. You may punch a clock each morning, do the same task hour after hour, and begin to feel like you are just a cog in a machine. You may be a parent, washing dishes and doing laun-

dry again and again, all with few words of gratitude. Or, as Ecclesiastes observes, you may acquire great success and wealth but eventually realize that you can't take it with you.

The writer of Ecclesiastes reveals the secret to meaningful work when he asks, "Without [God], who can . . . find enjoyment?" God wants us to see our work as a calling from him, and he assures us that our work has true meaning when we labor in service to him.

How will you serve God in your work today?

Jesus, you invite us to find meaning in our work as service to you. Help us to approach the work you have given us as doing it all for you. Amen.

WHEN WORK BECOMES OUR IDENTITY

I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ.

—Philippians 3:8

Your resume is a valuable tool, whether you are a high school student looking for a part-time job, a seasoned employee hoping to secure a prestigious position with a leading company, or something in between. On your resume, you may boast about the degrees you've earned, the awards you've been given, or the success you've enjoyed on the job.

But what happens when we make these qualities into the central piece of who we are? It's easy to get so wrapped up in our identity as employees, students, or parents that we can feel as if our worth depends on the work we do. Leaving our work behind—whether temporarily or permanently—causes us to lose our sense of identity. Failure in our work leaves us feeling worthless, while success creates a sense of arrogance and superiority. Our work is

distorted by sin when we make it into our identity.

Paul's resume was unmatched by most others. In our reading for today, Paul lists every quality that could have formed his identity: a top-notch education, professional success, religious devotion, moral excellence, and more. Yet he is quick to add that he would gladly throw it all away in exchange for a better identity as a child of God.

Your resume is not your identity; God has made you someone far greater than the sum of your accomplishments and failures. Rest in the joy that your identity is found in Jesus!

Father, we often use our occupations as a way to feel significant. Show us that we have a far greater identity in Jesus. Amen.

BECAUSE OF SIN, WORK IS UNJUST

Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you.

—James 5:4

James has a sobering message for people who hold positions of leadership in the workplace. On the surface, it might seem as if he is saying that financial success is wrong. But wealth is neither good nor evil; it's how we gain and use our wealth that counts.

When sin tempts us to make the bottom line our top desire, work becomes only a means to padding our pocketbook. People become either objects for us to use, or obstacles in the way of growing our fortune. Perhaps we underpay our employees to keep more for ourselves. Maybe we deliver a sub-quality product or compromise safety standards to keep more money for ourselves. Some of us may know the inequality of working for a company in which low-level employees are downsized out of work while top-level executives leave the company with a golden parachute.

If you are in a position of leadership at work, know that God's Word urges us to assess our priorities and structures in the workplace. Are we treating employees fairly? Do we treat those who work for us as people and not merely as cogs in a machine? If you experience injustice in the workplace, be assured that your cries reach the ears of God, and one day God will make things right.

Merciful God, we thank you for hearing the cries of all who are treated unfairly. Help us reflect your justice and mercy in the way we treat people who work for us, and help us endure unfair treatment till you make all things right. Amen.

REDEEMED FOR WORK: MASTERPIECES

We are . . . created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.
—Ephesians 2:10

It is said that when Michelangelo, the great Renaissance sculptor, looked at an ordinary piece of marble, he envisioned his masterpiece long before he put chisel to stone. In his mind, his creation existed even before he began to create.

Did you know that God, the greatest artist, has a glorious vision for each of his masterpieces, including you and me?

Long before creation, God had a purpose for our lives. The apostle Paul tells us that we are God's work of art. He has been busy fashioning us in Christ to be his masterpiece. But God did not create us merely for display. God has created us so that, in turn, we too become artisans. We are saved by God's grace so that we will fulfill the plan God has had for us from the beginning.

What plan is that? First, the good works God has prepared for us include a life of holiness. And, remember, God created us to work: to cultivate his garden and to draw out the potential embedded in creation. Though sin has damaged and distorted that plan, Jesus' work on the cross has redeemed it. We are re-created so that we may fulfill God's original purpose for work! How are you doing the good works God has prepared in advance for you?

Jesus, our Redeemer, we are in awe of the way you re-create broken people like us to be your masterpieces. Help us to honor you each day by doing the works you have prepared in advance for us to do. Amen.

REDEEMED FOR WORK: TALENTED!

"You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things."
—Matthew 25:23

Are you a wise investor?

Jesus is talking about a much more important investment than a stock portfolio or a retirement account; he's talking about us! We are not only God's masterpieces, as we learned from Ephesians 2. We are also God's investments.

God invests his wealth in us. Some of us are five-talent people with a variety of skills. Others of us are one- or two-talent people. But all of us have been invested with God's gifts.

What matters in the story Jesus told is not what the servants begin with, but how they manage what they have been given. No matter how many talents we have, God calls us to use our gifts in ways that further his purposes in the world. God is delighted when we take what he

has given us and use it to honor him and love our neighbor.

There is a warning in these verses. If we neglect the gifts God has given us, he will be displeased with how we have managed his investment.

Using our gifts purely for our own enrichment or discarding them altogether is not what God intends. God has invested the life of his Son to give us life; let's gladly seek to bring a return on his investment!

Lord Jesus, source of all good gifts, you have graciously poured yourself into us, giving us skills and gifts to use for your glory. Reveal to us how you would have us use these gifts in our work so that we honor you. Amen.

A NEW PATTERN OF WORK: YOUR NEW BOSS

Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people.

—Ephesians 6:7

Some employers can be difficult to work for. Perhaps the foreman on the worksite is degrading in the way he treats you. Maybe the district manager is overly critical and impatient. Many of us have worked for bosses who have unrealistic expectations. How is a Christian supposed to react in situations like these?

Paul was addressing a context different from ours; he was speaking to slaves about how they could serve their masters. While slavery in that day was in some ways different from slavery in North America, it could still be extremely difficult and degrading. Masters were often harsh, and beatings were not uncommon. And yet Christian slaves were encouraged to display the power of the gospel in the way they behaved toward their masters.

Simply put, God wants us to show the same respect, honor, and diligence to the CEO of the company, the principal of the school, or the manager of the restaurant, that we would give to Jesus. Doing what is asked of us by our superiors shouldn't be a way to earn points with them; it should be a way to please our true Master—Jesus. When you refuse to criticize your boss behind her back, and when you put your wholehearted effort into a sales call, your work becomes an act of thankfulness to your true master, Jesus Christ, and he is well-pleased with your work.

Master, you never lose your temper with us. You never criticize or treat us unfairly. May your grace supply the strength we need to do our daily work as work for you. Amen.

A NEW PATTERN OF WORK: WHO IS BOSS?

He who is both their Master and yours is in heaven.

—Ephesians 6:9

Ephesians 6 shows us how we are called to work as though our labor is for Jesus himself. But there's more. Many of us have people who are responsible to us: we may be district managers, business owners, stay-at-home parents, or teachers. How we use or abuse our power in our workplace says a great deal about how we grasp the gospel. Paul's message to the Ephesians has significant implications for us today.

In a time when it was assumed that masters could treat their servants with indifference at best and cruelty at worst, the gospel of Jesus leveled the playing field. Under the care and authority of Jesus, master and servant stood on equal footing because both were in fact fellow servants of Jesus Christ.

Today, Christian employers are called to treat their workers

with dignity and kindness. This principle applies whether we have two people working for us—or two thousand. If we have to discipline an employee, we will do so with a gentle spirit. Or if we have a say in who is promoted and who is not, we will do all we can to be fair.

Knowing that we ultimately report to a greater boss, let's do all we can to manage our employees as though we are serving Jesus himself.

Lord and Master, in our places of work or service, teach us to lead and manage as though we are serving you. Keep us from using our positions for selfish gain, and show us how to lead to the glory of God. In your name, Amen.

A NEW PATTERN OF WORK: HUMILITY

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.

—Philippians 2:5

The workplace can be like a totem pole. If you sit in the corner office on the 27th floor, you may think that the work of scrubbing the restrooms is beneath your position. If you've made partner in your law firm, you may think of basic legal research as unfitting for a person of your title. It's human nature to set up a pecking order, with prestigious jobs and titles at the top and "less important" jobs at the bottom.

Again, the gospel changes how we approach workplace structures. As people whom God is renewing each day, we bring the character of Jesus into our workplace. This means we bring remarkable humility into our jobs. The CEO will likely not do the work of a janitor, but she will appreciate and value the work the janitor does. This also means we have a readiness

to serve others. Is someone overwhelmed with projects? We might offer to take some work off their plate. Or perhaps we show willingness to take our turn at cleaning up the office kitchen.

A gospel-centered heart is quick to take up the tasks no one else wants to do; it is quick to give of oneself, even at great cost. It is a way of life that in all things shows eagerness to become a servant of others.

Humble Lord Jesus, you left the glory of heaven to serve those who least deserved it. Serving us meant that you had to experience great pain and suffering, yet you did so gladly. Teach us to be willing servants of the people we work for and with. Amen.

A NEW PATTERN OF WORK: INTEGRITY

Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine.

—Daniel 1:8

Daniel and his community had been uprooted from their homeland and deported to a foreign country. They had left behind their culture, their way of life, and many of their religious practices. Surprisingly, God used this devastating event to put his people in positions of influence.

So we find Daniel and his three friends employed in respectable government jobs. Yet while God had placed them there, they lived in tension between honoring their employer and honoring God. The food supplied by the new boss conflicted with God's commands. Did they consider compromise or outright rebellion? In the end, we know how they responded. The four colleagues respectfully proposed a trial period in which they would be allowed to eat according to their

convictions. Their supervisor agreed—and God proved faithful! Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego worked with integrity, and God blessed them.

We too are surrounded by competing values and ethics. Sometimes the pressure to compromise our convictions can overwhelm us, whether at the office, in the classroom, or at home. Yet we have an identity that is given to us in Christ. Let us commit ourselves to integrity, faithfully obeying God's Word and trusting him to bless us.

Faithful God, serving you with integrity is not easy. And sometimes the outcome may be harder than it was for Daniel and his friends. Yet you have called us to live as your children. Help us to work with integrity. Amen.

GOD'S COWORKERS: WORK THAT BEAUTIFIES

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

Recently I painted our bedroom. First the wallpaper had to be stripped from floor to ceiling. My wife and I met with a designer, who helped us to coordinate colors. Employees at the paint store helped us choose the paint best suited to our walls, and then mixed the paint to get the colors we wanted. For the next four days, I taped edges, covered furniture, and carefully applied two coats of paint to the room.

Our God is a God of magnificent beauty. Psalm 19 describes two of the ways God reveals himself to us. One way is through Scripture, and another way is through the splendor of the world around us. In beauty, we glimpse God. For many of us, our work allows us to create beauty. Architects, fashion designers, musicians, chefs, and countless other professions

bring to life textures, tones, tastes, and tints that reflect the beauty of our God.

Ultimately, God's beauty is seen most clearly in the person of Jesus, the clear and perfect image of God. As we labor in beautifying the world, we do our best work when we point to the source and image of beauty, Jesus Christ. As you labor this week, remember that your work can be the means by which others see the beauty of Christ!

God of colors, sounds, tastes, and textures, we delight in your beauty! The world around us declares your splendor. Help us in our daily work to reflect the beauty of your character so that we may join with the psalmist in declaring the glory of your name. Amen.

GOD'S COWORKERS: GOVERNING SOCIETY

The authorities that exist have been established by God.

—Romans 13:1

Every April, I do what many of us who live in the United States or Canada must do. I gather up a pile of forms and carry them to my accountant, who leads me through a maze of questions: Have I moved? Adopted? Invested? Divested? Soon afterward, he calls to tell me that my taxes are ready to file. All I have to do is sign my name.

It's easy to complain about paying taxes. In fact, it's easy to complain about all kinds of things in government. We gripe about the Prime Minister's stance on climate. We grumble that the President overreaches his authority. We find fault with the police, the justice system, the school board, and the city council.

Romans 13 reminds us that although we may not always agree with our leaders, we must submit to their authority. Paul called believers to submit to the

tyranny of the Roman government; we are called to submit to authority today. Many of us work in or on behalf of our government. Accountants help us pay taxes. Civil servants work to manage local, state, and federal resources for the good of the community. Police officers work to keep order in society. Each of these employees has the opportunity to serve as God's agent in this world. We are obligated to treat those in authority as God's authority over us.

Eternal God, you show your mercy for us by providing for order and structure in our society. May those who govern us do so with the attitude of Jesus. Help us to honor them as we would honor you. Amen.

GOD'S COWORKERS: NURTURING CHILDREN

Impress [these commandments] on your children.

—Deuteronomy 6:7

Among the many vocational hats that my wife wears, she is an at-home parent to our three rapidly growing children. On any given day, she can be found coloring pictures with our youngest, helping our oldest with her homework, or finding productive ways for our middle child to burn off his energy. Along with that she also does loads of laundry, referees sibling conflicts, and chauffeurs the kids to all kinds of activities.

God is passionately concerned about the care and nurture of children. The words from our reading today were God's instructions to his people Israel, urging them to be responsible to instruct their families in the knowledge and wisdom of his Word. This instruction was not to be limited to an hour or two a week. God said, "Talk about [these commands] when you sit at home and when you walk

along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." Nurturing children in the faith is a way of life.

Many of us instruct and nurture children in our daily work. Teachers help children cultivate their minds. Parents and grandparents provide safe and happy homes in which children grow. Social workers often step into broken family situations to show love to wounded children. Jesus himself showed his heart for children by welcoming them and blessing them. What a joy to work with him in the nurture of children!

Father God, thank you for caring for us physically, spiritually, and emotionally. Help us to reflect your love and care for children and youth in the work we do. Amen.

GOD'S COWORKERS: HEALTH AND HEALING

"Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons."
—Matthew 10:8

This must have been quite the mission for Jesus' disciples! Jesus sent his twelve closest followers into the towns of Judea to announce the good news that God's kingdom was near. They were also to show what life in God's kingdom looked like by bringing healing. As followers of Christ, they were to show how the gospel reverses the social, psychological, spiritual, and physical effects of sin in our world.

I recently visited a member of my church who was nearing the end of her earthly life. As I visited, nurses came and went, doctors consulted with the family, aides made sure she was comfortable. As I sat with her, I reflected on how Christians who work in healing professions have a unique perspective on their labor. Christians approach their work as co-laborers with God. Christian

doctors, therapists, and hospice workers know that God uses them to help bring healing into this broken world.

When people are ill, have surgery, or need to manage medication, we often pray for them. Sometimes God intervenes with amazing healing, as in biblical times, but most often God uses the many men and women who work with him to bring health and healing.

Lord Jesus, lead us to serve you as agents of health and healing in this world. Thank you for all who serve you by bringing healing today. Help each of us to radiate the healing power of the gospel in our daily lives. Amen.

GOD'S COWORKERS: CULTIVATING CREATION

She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.
—Proverbs 31:16

As a seminary student, I once preached about this text on Mother's Day. I can only imagine the burden I must have laid on mothers that day as I described the lofty standard of the Proverbs 31 wife and mother.

Proverbs 31 is not dictating how godly mothers and wives are supposed to act. Instead, this passage is describing Wisdom by means of a metaphor. This passage portrays how God's people can practice wisdom in their everyday lives.

One of the qualities of a life of wisdom is industry. Biblical wisdom, applied in everyday life, appears as someone who buys and sells land, designs clothing, and engages in financial transactions. Through hard work and innovation, a wise person turns the raw material of creation into something that benefits others.

God is the original creator, investor, and designer. He is the original entrepreneur who brings raw material into a form that is usable for us.

Today God continues that work through us. He uses real estate workers who develop land into housing; bakers who use ingredients to make tasty, healthful food; educators, builders, manufacturers, programmers, and more who help make our cities and nations run efficiently. God works through us in so many ways. How are you laboring with God to cultivate his creation?

Creator God, help us to use the gifts and resources you give us to benefit others today. In the name of Jesus, the true wisdom of God, we pray. Amen.

GOD'S COWORKERS: REDEMPTION AGENTS

"You are the salt of the earth."

—Matthew 5:13

Today's verse is simple: you and I are like salt crystals that God sprinkles into a fallen world. When Jesus spoke these words, salt was used as a preservative to keep meat from spoiling. Salt was also used in Jewish religious ceremonies to remind Israel that God had made a commitment to preserve his fallen world. Jesus was saying that *we* are the means God is using to preserve this broken world. You and I have opportunities to work as God's agents of redemption, keeping this world from spoiling.

We know that God works through our work to accomplish his purposes. In many ways our daily work is like salt in an unseasoned world. I have a friend who is a lawyer, working for the state government. She says that it can be difficult to work among people who do

not share her worldview. Yet she sees her work as a calling to bring Jesus' voice of grace and truth into the arena of state government.

You may work in this way too. Perhaps you are a social worker or a family therapist. Some of us work as addiction counselors or in the prison system. These can be dark places where the effects of sin are painfully obvious. Yet God is the God of redemption, and Jesus, the one who accomplished the supreme work of redemption, continues to work through us, his salt.

Lord, thank you for your resolve to redeem the world you made. We praise you for continuing to bring your redemptive mercy; help us live and work as your preserving life in this world. Amen.

GOD'S COWORKERS: PROVIDING FOR NEEDS

The LORD God made all kinds of trees . . . that were pleasing to the eye and good for food.
—Genesis 2:9

The other day, I ran to the store for a gallon of milk. I didn't think much of it then, but lots of people work hard just so I can pour milk on my cereal. A farmer cares for his cattle and milks them twice a day; a trucker hauls the milk from the dairy to a co-op, where it is pasteurized and packaged. Another trucker drives the milk to the grocer. Clerks stock the milk cooler. A cashier makes pleasant conversation while tallying up my bill. All of this takes place so I can enjoy my Frosted Flakes!

We've been reflecting on how our work plays a part in God's bigger purposes in this world. Today's verses draw our attention to the way God not only sets us to work but also provides for our material needs. Even after the fall, God's care has continued. Jesus, in his

ministry, cared not just for the spiritual needs of people but for their physical needs as well.

God uses countless professions to meet our basic needs, from restaurant chefs to truck drivers, from clothing manufacturers to home builders. Let's give thanks for all who are coworkers with God, through whom God faithfully provides for us in abundance!

Lord our provider, every morsel of food we eat, every article of clothing we wear, every home or apartment we dwell in is a gift from your gracious hand. All that we have comes to us because you work through many hard-working people to meet our needs. Thank you! Amen.

GOD'S PEOPLE AT WORK: JOSEPH

"He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt."
—Genesis 45:8

So far this month we've reflected on God's design for work, the ways in which sin distorts God's purposes in work, and how God's work of salvation changes our approach to work. We've also seen how our daily labor can mesh with God's ultimate work in this world. Now let's consider what God shows us in the life and work of some biblical characters.

After many years, Joseph had reached surprising heights in leadership. He had become prime minister over Egypt. But his career path had been filled with more downs than ups. He had begun in Egypt as a slave, later was falsely accused of sexual harassment, and then was imprisoned. He did a favor for someone that should have helped him get out of prison, but the person he had helped failed to speak up for him.

Though most of us haven't had to endure such extreme experiences, we can probably name some major obstacles we've faced over the years. Yet, looking back, Joseph saw the wisdom of God at work. Even in his times of struggle Joseph saw God's guiding, protecting hand.

You will, no doubt, experience setbacks as you serve God in your life and work. Some may feel like career-ending failures. But the same God who used the death of Jesus to accomplish his work of salvation can use setbacks to bring triumph in the work he calls you to do.

All-powerful God, you can take a setback or failure and turn it around to accomplish your saving plan. Teach us to trust that you are with us in whatever work you have called us to do. Amen.

GOD'S PEOPLE AT WORK: ESTHER

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

Have you ever wondered why you are in a particular job at a particular time? You may have found yourself caught in the middle of a heated interoffice conflict. Or you may have been assigned to lead a department that is highly dysfunctional. Sometimes God places us in situations that seem beyond our capacity to handle.

It's hard to imagine a more stressful position than Esther's. She rose from obscurity into a position of power and prestige. Yet whatever glitz and glamor she may have enjoyed quickly turned to terror when she learned of a plot to kill her people. Esther faced a dilemma: should she risk her life, revealing her true identity in order to save her people? Or should she preserve her life while her people perished? Her cousin Mordecai suggested that God

may have placed her in a position of authority especially to save her people.

Where you are working is no accident. God has placed you there for a purpose! Granted, your setting may not be as dramatic as Esther's, but God's purposes are no less significant. You might be in a position to speak the very words a client needs to hear today. You might mediate a conflict that has been brewing for weeks. You might be the one who helps an employee reach her full potential. The God who has chosen us in Christ for salvation continues to choose us to do his work!

Sovereign God, thank you for placing us where we are today. Reveal to us how we might be an instrument of your sovereign will. In Jesus, Amen.

GOD'S PEOPLE AT WORK: MUSICIANS

Praise him with the strings and pipe, praise him with the clash of cymbals.
—Psalm 150:4-5

God loves music. Throughout the Old Testament, God's people are often found singing, dancing, and playing musical instruments.

Psalm 150 is a glorious conclusion to a poetic book of the Bible that walks us through trials and triumph, grief and joy, betrayal and vindication. The words of Psalm 150 invite us to celebrate that journey by making music with every instrument we can find.

As we look at the ways God puts his people to work, it's worth observing the many musicians at work throughout Scripture. Some of them were professional musicians, hired to lead worship at the temple. Many others played instruments to bring joy into the lives of the people listening. Music was used to celebrate religious festivals and to announce im-

portant news. Music brought joy at wedding feasts and helped people mourn at funerals. David even used music to sooth angry King Saul!

Throughout Scripture we see many musicians at work, serving God and their neighbors. Today is no different; guitars, organs, and drums help us adore our Savior. Jazz music sets a soothing atmosphere. Folk music tells a story. Love songs bring out deep sentiments. Music taps into the depths of our souls and helps us express the wide range of our emotions. Thank God for musicians!

God of beauty and creativity, we delight in the gift of music, and we thank you for musicians who have helped your people sing to you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

GOD'S PEOPLE AT WORK: JESUS

"Isn't this the carpenter's son?"

—Matthew 13:55

Very little is said about Jesus' life before he began his teaching ministry. Our reading for today is one of two places in the New Testament where we are told that Jesus worked as a carpenter or builder before beginning his ministry. It's clear from Matthew's gospel that the crowds weren't quite sure what to make of Jesus. Here he was teaching and preaching in ways that astounded the audience, but that wasn't the Jesus they were familiar with. For years they had watched Jesus hammer nails into wood, lay stone foundations for buildings, and perhaps craft toys or furniture.

Have you ever reflected on what it means that Jesus was a blue-collar worker for many years before beginning to preach and teach? Imagine—Jesus took on human flesh and got up each morning to go to

work, just like so many of us. The same person who formed the universe picked up a saw and chisel to cut and mold timber. He who shaped iron ore deep in the ground hoisted stones to make buildings.

Jesus affirms the dignity and value of human work. Work is not evil, and it's not beneath God's concern.

Because Jesus sees the value in coveralls and hammers, we too can approach our work each day as an exercise of service to God, using the skills and abilities he has given us.

Lord Jesus, we wonder what it must have been like for you to spend so many years in the working world. Thank you for showing by your work how our work is worthy. Amen.

GOD'S PEOPLE AT WORK: LYDIA

The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.

—Acts 16:14

The book of Acts is a fast-paced book of the Bible. The church was on the move! It grew quickly as the early apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit, traveled throughout the urban centers of the Roman Empire. The main human characters in this book are people like Peter, John, and Paul. And it's exciting to see how the gospel message transforms thousands of individuals who respond to the gospel while continuing to serve God in their vocations.

Lydia was one such example. She was a business woman who made a good living working in the fashion industry by buying and selling luxurious cloth. Lydia gathered with other women from her community to pray, and Paul came to share the good news of Jesus with them. The Holy Spirit opened her heart, and Lydia believed!

Lydia then used her position and wealth to show hospitality to Paul and his companions. And we can assume that after they moved on to other cities, Lydia continued in her work and calling as a textile merchant.

The gospel doesn't usually lead us to abandon our jobs in order to enter full-time ministry. The pattern in the early church is that the gospel transforms ordinary people, with ordinary jobs, into people who use what they have available in service to God.

Lord Jesus, thank you for opening our hearts to your message, and for changing us so that our daily work can become a tool in your hands. Help us to use whatever we have in service to you and others. Amen.

WORK AND REST

Anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his.
—Hebrews 4:10

When was the last time you had a day off? For some of us, taking time off is easy. As soon as we go home from the workplace, we also leave all the cares of the working world behind. For others, taking time off is nearly impossible. We may leave our workplace in body, but in our minds we continue to churn through the work we have to do. Our cell phone continues to ring, and we constantly check our email.

Learning to rest is vital, not only for our body and mind but also for our soul. Our reading today points us to the true rest that God gives us in Jesus. In Jesus, we enjoy the deep-seated rest of knowing that our life is fully and completely in God's care, and that our true identity is found in belonging to Jesus. We are not the mere sum of our professional successes and

failures. We are not what we accomplish. We are not our job title. Ultimately, our work is not what provides for our needs. God is our provider, our protector, and our redeemer, and he is our true and deepest rest.

By resting from our work each week, we are publicly declaring to ourselves and others that we depend on God's care for us. Are you practicing the rest that God intends for you?

Lord Jesus, you have accomplished for us the work we most need: you have paid the debt of our sin. Because of that, we can rest even as we work. Help us to learn to trust in your perfect care for us so that we may also practice rest. Amen.

THE END OF WORK: PURIFYING FIRE

The earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.

—2 Peter 3:10

We've spent this month looking at work in the scope of God's ultimate purpose for creation. We observed that God's first command to human beings was to work. Our daily work is our part in God's work of cultivating the raw material of his creation.

There is much that is imperfect in our work. Our sin and human sinfulness so often corrupt the work of our hands. We may serve as public officials, but our efforts can bear the marks of self-interest rather than righteousness. We may manage a farm or another business, but in doing so we can neglect to care for God's creation. The fingerprints of our sinfulness mar every human endeavor.

Peter points to a day in which the presence of our Lord Jesus will cleanse and purify everything in creation. Fire can be

incredibly destructive, but it can also strip away impurities. As Peter describes "the day of the Lord," he depicts a fire that will burn away everything that is sinful, imperfect, and unholy. When God's purifying fire has done its work, the new heaven and the new earth will remain.

As we labor today, we may be well aware of the imperfection in our work. Yet Peter urges us to continue to work as holy and godly people, hoping for the day when the labor of our hands will be cleansed from all sin.

Holy God, we confess that our work bears the stain of sin. We look forward to the day when imperfections will be destroyed and we can live in full fellowship with you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE HOLY CITY

[The angel] showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.

—Revelation 21:10

Cities can be challenging places to live. In concentrated urban centers, the problems of humankind are concentrated and plain to see. In the past few years in particular, unrest in cities around the world has drawn attention to our brokenness. In the heart of metropolitan areas we find poverty, racism, violence, and injustice.

Yet remarkably, when John has a vision of heaven, he sees a perfected city, coming down from heaven to earth. It's a city of immense beauty; precious stones and metals make up the foundation, walls, and infrastructure of this stunning reality. Many scholars have compared this new Jerusalem, so carefully drawn out by John, to a perfected Holy of Holies. In the Old Testament, the Most Holy Place in the temple in Jerusalem was where God came to dwell and be literally pres-

ent among his people. In John's vision the entire city is where God's presence dwells.

One day every area of created life will be fully and completely lived out in the presence of God: art, science, commerce, technology, agriculture, and so much more will all be present in the eternal city of God.

Let us work fervently, then, as we await the day when all aspects of life in this world will reach their full potential in the radiating presence of God.

Eternal God, we can only imagine what it will be like when your glorious presence radiates through every nook and cranny of your created world. Empower us to labor each day in the hope of the world to come. Amen.

GOD'S FINISHED WORK

The kings of the earth will bring their splendor into [the city].

—Revelation 21:24

When I was younger, my parents took me to see Canada Place under construction. This iconic building near the banks of the North Saskatchewan River in Edmonton took several years to build, and it was a remarkable sight as it rose up from a giant hole in the ground to become a skyscraper against the clouds. Even as a boy, I remember a sense of anticipation as hundreds of builders worked toward their goal.

We began our devotions this month on God's example of work in creation. God then set human beings to work as caretakers who would help him bring out the full potential and possibilities of creation. Millennia later, we labor under the curse of sin in the hope of ultimate renewal. This passage from John's vision of heaven gives us a glimpse of God's finished work. Heaven will

be a great and glorious city! The garden of creation will reach its full potential, and all who love Jesus will dwell there with God forever.


"The kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it." What will this splendor be? Many think it will include cultural treasures spanning the ages. Imagine: music from the Baroque period, art from the Renaissance, poetry of Eastern Asia, delicacies from South America, advances in technology, and much more—all carried in as an offering to God! Let us work today in anticipation of that great and glorious day!

Thank you, God, for the gift of work. Thank you that one day we will live with you in the fullness of your glory forever! Amen.

NOTES

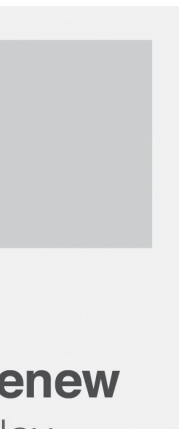
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