

Nov/Dec 2024

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

The Light
Still *Shines*

ALSO: DESCRIBING GOD

Dear Friends:

How should we describe God?

In November, Pastor Ben McKnight explores a number of the Bible's descriptions of God. The Bible, God's trustworthy revelation of himself, shows us that God is the creator of the heavens and the earth; the sustainer of all he has made; the tender, loving Father of his children; the righteous and just judge; the defender of the weak; the Lord of the nations; the mighty shield of the powerless—and much more. Knowing who God is can help us grow in our love and worship of him, inspiring us to share who he is and how much he loves the world.



Each year during Advent we prepare our hearts to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And in December, Chris Schoon, a pastor working with many congregational ministries, explores the Bible's imagery pointing to Jesus as God's light coming into the world. The light of Jesus shines into the darkness of our hearts and our world, illuminating God's love for us and his plan to redeem our sin-broken world. Reflecting on Jesus, the light of the world, can bring us hope, peace, and joy as we celebrate his birth and are renewed to spread his light in this world.

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

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Kurt Selles

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**“Describing God”
Ben McKnight**



**“The Light Still Shines”
Chris Schoon**

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**ReFrame
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november

Describing God

Ben McKnight

How would you describe God? If you were telling friends, family members, or classmates about God, what would you tell them?

The Bible—in both the Old and New Testaments—provides a wonderful variety of ways to describe God. God is portrayed as a defender, advocate, and shepherd. He is our master, friend, and loving parent. At all times, especially when we realize that no one else can fill those roles, we find deep comfort in who God is.

As we reflect on and pray about the various ways God is described in the Bible, may we find peace and joy in the truth of God's Word. May we remember with the psalmist that God "is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does" (Psalm 145:13).

Ben McKnight was born and raised in the West Michigan area. He has been married to Kayla for 14 years and has been a dad to Leo for almost five years. After graduating from Calvin Theological Seminary in 2017, he served as a pastor in Grant, Michigan, until spring 2021. He then served as a chaplain for a year at a local retirement community, and then with ReFrame Ministries' advancement team. In spring 2024 he transitioned and began serving as the pastor of a church in Cedar Springs, Michigan.

GOD, THE FATHER

The Spirit you received . . . brought about your adoption. . . . And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."
—Romans 8:15

Belonging to something bigger or greater than ourselves is something that nearly everyone wants. We experience moments of belonging at concerts, or sporting events, or community gatherings. In those moments we can feel like a member of our favorite musical group or like a player for our favorite sports team. We feel connected as we share stories with our neighbors and friends. We feel seen. We feel heard. We feel accepted. We may even feel loved.

God has a similar desire for us—he wants us to feel that we belong to him. God longs for us to feel connected to him, to be satisfied in knowing that he sees, hears, and accepts us. The difference, though, in belonging to God begins with his unconditional love and care for us. That kind of love happens when we accept and

embrace that God's love for us is so great and grand that he wants to satisfy our greatest desire of belonging by adopting us into his family and calling us his own. As a part of God's eternal family, we are seen, we are heard, we are accepted, and we are loved by the unconditional love of our heavenly Father.

Father God, thank you for adopting me into your family, and for satisfying my desire to belong to something greater. Help me today to show that same kind of love to others so that they may know you also. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

GOD, THE FRIEND

The LORD longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion.
—Isaiah 30:18

I often picture God sitting on an ornate throne made of rare metals, adorned with priceless jewels, and upholstered in the finest fabric. Some Bible passages portray God in a similar way.

But, what if, for a moment, we close our eyes, quiet our souls, and imagine God differently? What if God—still in all his glory and splendor—isn't sitting in lavishness associated with royalty but instead is sitting at the corner booth in a local coffee shop, or on the couch in your family room, eagerly waiting for you? What if God, who is so excited to see you, leaps from his seated position and embraces you like a friend who longs to hear how you are doing and what you have been up to? What if God, in both his divine and human nature, gives you his undivided attention as you share with him your life,

your story, your joys, and your concerns? What if . . . ?

How do you see God today? Or, maybe a better question: How do you need to see God today? The beauty of God is that he is not only the King of all creation but also the attentive friend who is always near.

Gracious God, thank you for being the ruler of all things and the dear friend who is always present with us. Thank you for the ways you show your compassion, and help us today to share that same care with the people you place on our path. Amen.

GOD, THE ADVOCATE

The LORD upholds all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down.
—Psalm 145:14

The psalmist describes the immeasurable size and scope of God's kingdom. There is no beginning or end to the Lord's reign or to his ruling power. With that sort of status, it's difficult to imagine how God has the time to look after all the things happening in our universe, let alone the things happening in our lives.

An advocate is a person who publicly supports another person—at times standing beside them when things get tough. Advocates come in many different forms: from lawyers and legal counselors to teachers and coaches to parents and friends. Regardless of the relationship, an advocate stands by a person as a way to show support and solidarity.

The psalmist also points out that the Lord picks us up when we fall and builds us up when we feel unworthy.

Does this mean God has to pause or stop the hands of time in order to help catch our stumbling feet? And does he do it while rolling his eyes? Not at all. As our advocate, God faithfully supports us, especially when we need it most. God's character is not dependent on our ability, and in him our status as people called and adopted by the King is already fully established.

Merciful Lord, thank you for lifting us up when we fail, and for holding us up when we feel weak. We know that in our weakness your strength is perfect, so we continue to humble ourselves before your goodness and kindness. Amen.

GOD, THE DEFENDER

He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing.

—Deuteronomy 10:18

Many people are blessed with a relational safety net—a means of protection when they face a sudden tragedy or unexpected loss. Parents or guardians and other family members are often seen in this way. When we know we have access to that kind of security, everyday life can seem easier and less stressful.

But some people do not have those types of relationships. What's more, there may be several reasons why a person might face unfortunate circumstances. We can imagine a person who, after the death of a spouse or partner, is experiencing loneliness or the fear of having an increasingly isolated life. Or perhaps we can imagine the trauma of a teenage child who loses a parent—and their life is suddenly changed forever. Maybe you know someone with a story

like that—or maybe something like that has happened to you.

Wherever you are and whoever you are, God has mercy on you. And no matter what you're going through, God sees you. God is there to defend you, protect you, clothe you in righteousness, and nourish you with the bread of life, which is Christ Jesus.

Mighty King, have mercy on everyone who is hungry for physical and relational nourishment. Protect people who are lonely, and uplift those who cannot stand on their own. Spirit, use us also in whatever ways we can help to provide safety for others in need. Amen.

GOD, THE PROVIDER

They all ate and were satisfied. . . .

—Matthew 14:20

This story about feeding more than 5,000 people is usually told from the viewpoint of the disciples. I wonder what it was like to be a person in the crowd. Imagine being surrounded by thousands of people—men and women of all shapes, sizes, and ages. You would probably see young children running around as parents tried to corral them along the shoreline. And seniors slowly shuffling to find a place close enough to Jesus so they could hear him speak. It was probably an example of what people have called “organized chaos.” Even Jesus’ disciples didn’t know what to do with the hungry followers (see vv. 15-17).

What was it like to see the calm and measured face of Jesus in the midst of such a hectic scene? How did Jesus know he could feed all those

hungry people with just “five loaves of bread and two fish”?

Jesus knew he could feed the starving crowd because he was and is the Son of God, who not only provided the bread and fish but also created the earth and established everything in it, from the waters where the fish lived to the land that provided the grain used to bake bread. Knowing the power of the Creator gave Jesus the opportunity to invite others to know him too.

Great God, thank you for your constant provision, and forgive me when I fail to see your grace and mercy in the everyday rhythms of life. Thank you also for your Son, Christ Jesus, and for the life you provide through him for us all. Amen.

GOD, THE FAITHFUL SHEPHERD

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

—Psalm 23:4

Being a shepherd in ancient times was not a glamorous career choice. It was a hectic life, full of danger and stress, not to mention that sheep are not the most intelligent of God's creatures.

Even so, the life and rhythm of a shepherd were remarkable. In Psalm 23, for example, we read about the shepherd's rod and staff. These were very necessary pieces of equipment for the shepherd's many tasks. The rod (like a club) was used to fend off predators, and the staff was used as a guide and reminder to the sheep along the trail. When traveling through a hilly region with steep dropoffs, the shepherd would walk alongside the sheep, using the staff as a guardrail so that they wouldn't stumble and fall. And during early-morning or late-evening trips, when the sunlight was gone and the path

was dark, the shepherd would tap his rod against the face of a rock wall, producing a sound that would echo from the front of the flock all the way to the back. It was a way to remind the sheep that the shepherd was still there, assuring them that they were safe and secure.

The Bible often compares us with sheep, describing the Lord as our faithful shepherd, who by his grace and compassion guides us with this rod and staff, gently reminding us that we are safe and secure in his care.

Great Shepherd, thank you for all the ways you provide for us each day. Help us to be attentive and to hear you calling us as you safely guide and lead us. Amen.

GOD, THE RELIEVER

"They will share the burden of the people with you so that you will not have to carry it alone."
—Numbers 11:17

Moses and the Israelites had been camping in the desert for over two years as God made his covenant with them and began leading them to the land he had promised them. They knew God would take them there, and they knew Moses was the leader to do it, but the longer it took, the more anxious and unsettled the people became. Moses became unsettled too, and he was nearly at a breaking point.

Many people experience similar kinds of stresses, leading to anxiety, doubt, and fear. Some even reach the point of burn-out, unsure of what to do next. The beauty of this story is that it shows how God steps into Moses' situation to rescue and relieve him, to offer support when he needs it most.

God instructs Moses to seek out others who can help to carry the burden of leadership

and relieve some of the stress he has been feeling. Further, God tells Moses that his Spirit will be on these leaders as they walk alongside Moses in the journey ahead.

Through God's power and by this strength, Moses and all the Israelites are encouraged as God intervenes and provides for their needs.

Lord God, you know us better than we know ourselves. Thank you for the tender way you step in and walk alongside us when we are struggling. By your Spirit, restore us, and may we also gain courage and compassion to step in and minister to others through the strength you provide for us. Amen.

GOD, THE HEART HEALER

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.
—Psalm 34:18

On the radio the other day I heard a familiar song about heartbreak. There are probably hundreds, if not thousands, of songs written throughout history about broken hearts and lost loves. Have you ever wondered why musicians and music producers keep writing about that same thing?

Maybe people do not tire of those types of songs because everyone can relate to them in some way. Nearly everyone has experienced feelings of emptiness after a breakup, or they have asked themselves “What went wrong?” after losing their love.

Thankfully God’s Word provides some guidelines to help us answer our questions and give us peace of mind when heartache and heartbreak happen. When we hurt, Scripture can provide comfort. It also gives us a way to express how

we feel, especially when we don’t know what to say or how to say it. Much of that language can be found in the Psalms, and many psalms were written by people who shared their feelings candidly and honestly.

David, the writer of Psalm 34, didn’t have to search long for peace, and neither do we. God is near to those who hurt, and we can trust today that the One who gave the sun its ability to shine, who told the waters how far they could go, and who constantly watches over the universe is also near to you—and he’s saying, “I’ve got this, and I’ve got you.”

Lord, draw near to all who are hurting today, and may they know you are holding them in your hands. Amen.

GOD, THE FAMILY HOME

Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.
—Hebrews 4:16

There's something refreshing about being able to visit a friend without having to ask permission or to call ahead. If we open our homes to others, they can be places where food, conversation, and fellowship flow freely. In those settings we often feel at peace because the warmth of comfort and acceptance help us feel like we belong.

What if you visited a home that, instead of feeling like a space where you could relax and enjoy the company of others, seemed to you like a museum? What if the conversation with others was more like sharing information than sharing life? Your visit would likely feel rather cold, rigid, and dry.

There are Christian congregations and faith communities that fall on either end of

that spectrum, and many land somewhere in the middle. But our hope, as Christians, should be that every church (both the building and the people inside it) should be like a welcoming home, a place full of grace, mercy, and unconditional love. A space where people can set aside their "baggage" and "burdens," flop down on the couch of confession, and sink into the cushions of forgiveness and grace. A home is where you're offered a drink of living water and the bread of life, where you experience glimpses of the eternal house of God.

Father, help us to model your heavenly welcome here on earth as we make room for people in our hearts and homes to receive your grace and mercy. Amen.

GOD, THE TRUSTWORTHY PARENT

“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

—Matthew 18:3

Growing up and getting older can be difficult to do. Our responsibilities and obligations grow, and often our imaginations slowly fade. There are positives to growing mature and aging, but I believe many of us wouldn't mind taking a step back to relive some of the good times we had when we were children. Can you remember when simple things brought you a lot of joy? We might refer to such times as “good old days” if we had nice childhood memories and time seemed to move slower, family meals seemed to last longer, and interruptions from phones were less common.

But we do have to grow up eventually. If that is the case, though, why would Jesus encourage his followers to “become like little children”? According to Christ, the way in which people inherit and enjoy

the glory of God's kingdom is to have the sincere, trusting faith that a child has for a trustworthy parent. And that simply means allowing God to shape our hearts and minds into that of a child who trusts in him fully, knowing that he cares and will always do what is best for his children. It means allowing our sanctified imaginations to wonder about all the things that our big, awesome, and powerful God can do—and how he can involve us in his work in this world.

Great God, thank you for the reminder that having childlike faith draws us close to you. By your Spirit, reignite our imaginations and fill us with excitement about what you have in store for us to do. Amen.

GOD, THE ANCHOR

Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.
—Hebrews 10:23

In the mid-20th century a musician named Albert Goodson wrote a song titled “We’ve Come This Far by Faith.” It soon became popular because it reminded believers to hold on steadfastly to the hope of God’s promises never to leave or forget about his children. Even when it may seem that hard times are stacked against them, followers of Christ can know that God’s gift of faith has brought them where they are and will carry them through.

As humans living in a world that is broken by sin, we are all vulnerable to hurt, pain, sadness, and loss. Many—if not all—of us have experienced the trials of life and have been bruised by them. As Christians, we know that we live in between the fallen nature of this world, which is merely a shadow of things yet

to come, and the fullness of life in a world that will one day be fully restored. As the body of Christ, we eagerly await the fullness of life, and in the meantime we continue to lean on the Lord, unmoved by the trials and temptations of life.

Ultimately we rely on the Word of God as our source of life. And in hope we can join together, encouraging one another and building each other up as we journey through life in faith.

Steadfast Savior, thank you for your faithfulness each day. May we, as your children and image-bearers, continue to represent you in our homes, classrooms, careers, and communities as we trust in you and your Word. Amen.

GOD, THE GRACIOUS GIVER

Each of you should . . . serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.

—1 Peter 4:10

I recently met up with a group of friends I've known for many years. During our meal together we laughed at some funny stories and sympathized with some difficult ones, and at the end of the evening we hugged each other before going our separate ways. We are all grateful for one another, having been there for each other through both joys and sorrows.

A common thread in the fabric of our relationship is that grace abounds in all the interactions we have with one another. The term *grace* has several definitions, but in this situation I would define it as "a courteous goodwill that is unmerited." In other words, it involves compassion and kindness over anything else.

Now, it should be said that even though grace abounds in our group of friends, that doesn't mean we don't dis-

agree with one another at times. Yet no matter how challenging a disagreement can get, our friendship remains because grace continues to lead the way.

Gracious Father, thank you for the abounding grace you provide in our lives through your forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Help us to extend that grace to others, whether they be close friends or new acquaintances. Transform us into a people who lead with grace each and every day. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

GOD, OUR CLOSEST FRIEND

A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity.
—Proverbs 17:17

One of God's greatest gifts to humanity is relationships. We are created for relationships; we are designed by God to be in community with others.

We will meet many people over our lifetime. With some, we will have no more than brief interactions in passing by, and with others we will have friendly acquaintances. Still others will become friends, even close friends, and others will become companions for life.

With some friends our relationships can feel as close as family, like a brother or sister, and we may love them just like family members. These are friends who will be there in both good times and bad, triumphs and tragedies, times of joy and times of sorrow.

Did you know that, in Jesus, God is actually our closest

friend? He isn't a passerby who merely sizes us up, or an acquaintance who enters our life from time to time. Jesus is our brother, our closest friend, who gave up his own life so that we can become the adopted children of God, members of God's everlasting family, and coheirs in his eternal inheritance (see Romans 8:14-17).

Father in heaven, we can't imagine how big your home must be to fit all of your adopted sons and daughters in it. Thank you for creating us to be in relationship with others. We look forward to the day when all your children will gather for the ultimate feast in your presence. Strengthen our faith and patience as we wait for that glorious day. Amen.

GOD, THE MASTER OF THE UNIVERSE

"Have you entered the storehouses of the snow or seen the storehouses of the hail . . . ?"
—Job 38:22

Have you ever noticed that things that looked really big when you were a child don't seem so big when you are older? I remember walking through my old elementary school after becoming an adult, and one of the first things I noticed was how much smaller everything looked and felt.

But it's not just the size of things that seems different; our perception of time changes too. When I was a boy, a summer night seemed to last and last, and a school year seemed to go on forever.

Life changes as we age. Congested calendars and stacked schedules abbreviate our lives. Deadlines, commitments, and requests beg, steal, and borrow our attention from the beauty of life and the creation God has given us to care for and enjoy.

Maybe even more tragic is that we can lose our sense of God's grandeur as we grow older. As children, we tend to view God as huge and magnificent, someone with incredible power and ability, able to do even more than any superhero! As we age and live longer, though, we can tend to question God's actions, critique his plans, and challenge his authority. We might even believe we know what's best for us, thinking we know our situation better than God does. Instead, though, we need to turn to our Creator and ask for his mercy, for he holds us in his hands and truly loves and cares for us always.

King of creation, thank you for your enduring mercy. Forgive us when we diminish you. Humble us to see you as you truly are. Amen.

GOD, THE ADVOCATE (II)

"I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever. . . ." —John 14:16

An advocate offers support and pleads on behalf of someone (or something), ensuring fair and honest treatment. An advocate aims to look after, protect, care for, and fight for the one they are assigned to. The Bible's word for this, in Greek, is *paraclete*, and this means "called to the side of."

The Holy Spirit, our *paraclete*, is God's gift to all who follow Jesus. The Spirit of God continues the work of Jesus by empowering us to continue the Lord's work on this earth: teaching, sharing the good news of God's salvation, caring for the sick—the list goes on and on. In addition, the Holy Spirit helps us understand the truth of the message and ministry of Jesus.

The Spirit of truth not only helps our understanding but is also our Counselor and Comforter, and these roles tie

in with the work of an advocate as well.

Christians and the church have been given the wonderful gift of the Holy Spirit, who comes alongside to protect and defend, encourage and embolden, admonish and correct. And through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Lord's people carry on the truth of God's redemptive plan for all creation.

Triune God, you are mysterious and magnificent. The Father's love, exemplified in the life of the Son, and poured out in us through the Holy Spirit, gives us all we will ever need to be received into your glorious kingdom. May we ever grow in faith and live faithfully for you. Amen.

GOD, THE FORTRESS

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

—Psalm 46:1

When I was a young child, I was often afraid of thunderstorms. The lightning flashes and the rumbling thunder were startling and scary, and I would grow anxious if I heard that a storm was coming. I'm not sure where my fear of thunderstorms came from, but I think it may have been rooted in the uncertainty of what would happen as a storm rolled through.

Fortunately I had a home to shelter me and a blanket to protect me. It's strange to think that something as frail as a blanket could feel strong during a dreadful storm. But that comfortable blanket of my childhood represented an unmatched level of security, safety, and protection that I needed when I was afraid.

God offers us even more effective security and safety from the storms of life when pain

flashes through our hearts and crises rattle us to the bone. Like a great comforter and yet stronger than a mighty fortress, our God invites us to take shelter in him and to be protected by his love, which is gentle and yet stronger than any force or calamity that may threaten.

Comforting Father, thank you for providing us safety and security when we are overwhelmed by the storms and struggles of life. Shower us with your mercy when hard times and challenges arise, and restore our strength as we shelter under your mighty protection. Amen.

GOD, THE DETERMINED ANGLER

"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

"The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid." —Hebrews 13:5-6

A fly-fishing enthusiast can tell you about all the excitement that can unfold when you hook a fish much bigger than one you planned for. An angler—that is, a person who fishes with a rod and line—typically uses the equipment they need for catching a particular kind of fish. To catch a medium-size fish (like a trout), for example, you need tackle for that size of fish. But sometimes with that gear you can hook a much larger fish (like a salmon). And when that happens, chaos can break loose.

The reel will spin furiously, unloading the line as the large fish swims powerfully away. Then panic can set in because you don't want to lose your expensive tackle, let alone the fish. Usually then you'll have just two options: to let the fish run, and hopefully tire it out so that you can catch it; or simply to

cut the line and let the fish go. A determined angler may decide to hold on, skillfully using the rod and line through a long tug of war and gradually reeling the fish in.

In some ways our relationship with God can be like that. We might be thinking we are free to do as we please, but God can hook us, and even though we might try to outrun and overpower him, he will never cut the grace-line or count us as a lost cause. He'll fight for us and battle with us—and when all is said and done, he gives us the freedom to live a new and full life that is far beyond our imagining!

Lord, thank you for not cutting us off or counting us out. Reel us in by your wonderful gift of grace and help us share it with others. Amen.

GOD, THE CONCERNED SHEPHERD

"Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'" —Luke 15:6

The term "Christian" roughly translates into "little Christ," meaning that a person who follows Christ is an extension of Jesus and a representative of his Father in heaven. This is a heavy responsibility for two significant reasons. There is the personal nature of being a Christian, which includes self-discipline and continuing growth into maturity of faith. There is also the communal nature of Christian living, and this requires our energy and resources as we involve ourselves in the lives of others, such as friends, neighbors, and even complete strangers. So, like Christ, Christians are called to be there when life is good and to search out others who have been wandering and need to know Christ or to come back into his family.

The truth is that we are all like sheep in some ways, and

at some point or other we have walked away from the Lord, our shepherd. We have wandered off, distracted by what we think is greener grass, cooler water, or a better pasture. We've gotten lost, and we've gone through days—even whole seasons—when the sound of his voice is so faint that we barely notice it. Yet, like a good shepherd, Jesus is fully committed to rescuing each and every sheep that has lost its way. And not one can wander so far that he can't find them.

Great Shepherd, thank you for continuing to look after us, even when we have strayed. Help us to listen for your call when we begin to wander, and protect us when we have gotten lost. Amen.

GOD, THE GIVER OF FULL LIFE

When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."
—Luke 19:20

Sometimes I find it hard to ask someone for help. I'm not sure if it's my pride to be independent or my fear of being a burden that gets in the way, but I know there have been times in my life when asking someone for something would have eased the burden I was carrying.

Our reading in Luke 5 today is a wonderful story about someone asking for help. A paralyzed man, with some of his friends, heard that Jesus was teaching at a neighbor's house. The man and his friends knew of Jesus' ability to heal, so the friends found an unusual way to carry the man to meet Jesus, in the hope that he could be healed.

Something that has often struck me about this story is Jesus' response. He doesn't mention their hard work and bravery to bring the man to

him for healing. Instead he first commends the man for his faith and forgives his sin.

What I've learned here is that the friends of the paralyzed man deeply loved him and wanted him to experience the fullness of life—walking, running, jumping, and more. And Jesus wanted the man, along with his friends, to experience the fullness of life even more—by having life in his kingdom forever. This is a story about someone who asks for help in this life and receives even more—the amazing fullness of the life to come.

Lord, we stand before you in need of your help, for without you we are helpless. Forgive us, we pray, and may your Spirit mold and shape us more into your image each day. Amen.

GOD, THE GARDENER

“He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.”
—John 15:2

I don't know much about plants, but I imagine it might be painful for a vine to go through the pruning process. I also imagine that if I were a plant, I might get frustrated with the gardener for lopping off parts of me without asking for my opinion or permission.

Thinking about it a little more, gardeners don't prune out of anger or frustration. They prune because they want the plant to grow healthier and stronger so that it can bear good fruit. The gardener sees the overall vision of the plant, while the plant can only “see” what's right in front of them. With that in mind, Jesus' words here make good sense.

Pruning is the way God removes parts of us that are overgrown and not producing. It may mean we have to let go of some comforts, and doing

that can remove troublesome distractions in our life. Through pruning we are able to see more clearly who we are and what God has in mind for us, even if that means enduring some pain along the way.

Whatever might pain us in the pruning process, it's the transforming of our heart, mind, and soul that God wants to see, because he wants our fruit to grow—fruit that one day we will be able to share with others for the goodness and glory of our Lord, the master gardener.

Gentle God, thank you for the pruning you are doing in our lives today. We may not like it, but we need to trust you with our future. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

GOD, THE ETERNITY SETTER

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.
—Ecclesiastes 3:1

I can still remember the sound of the little bird that popped out of the old cuckoo clock on the wall at my grandparents' house. Every hour, on the hour, the red faded bird would announce the time. I also recall that when the bird was quiet, I could hear the second hand ticking away the seconds of the day.

It's often said that you can't get time back, so it's best to make use of the time you have. Though the author of Ecclesiastes didn't write those words, they sound like something he might have said. In Ecclesiastes we hear the words of a person who has had the opportunity to look back on his life and recall the joys, concerns, victories, and defeats he has experienced. We hear someone who reflects on how important each season was.

Notably, the wise King Solomon, who wrote Ecclesiastes, ends his short reflection by commenting that God makes all things beautiful in their time and sets eternity in the human heart (v. 11). That brings me back to those days in my grandparents' home with the cuckoo clock, and I remember stories that they shared around the dinner table. I can't get that time back, but the beauty of the memories lives on, and the thought of reuniting with those family members in God's presence in eternity brings me joy, both now and forever.

Lord God, thank you for eternity, and please instill in our hearts the hope of everlasting life. Strengthen us by your Spirit, and help us to reflect on your goodness each day. Amen.

GOD, THE ENCOURAGER

Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. . . .
—1 Peter 2:10

Peter, one of Jesus' closest followers, urgently encouraged Christians in the first century as they endured intense persecution, suffering, trials, and hardships. I imagine that Peter's words also helped to lift himself up in some way, especially considering the changes he went through since first meeting Jesus near the Sea of Galilee. Once a professional fisherman, he soon became a church planter, a pastor, an encourager, and a defender of the faith. He went from mending nets to leading the newly formed church of Jesus Christ, full of freshly baptized believers.

Peter's words are unapologetically bold while also being full of grace and love. Although these words were written over 2,000 years ago, they are just as true today for you and me, because we too are God's cho-

sen people, a group called to be ministers and shepherds in our homes and communities. We have been set apart by God's grace, and we are heirs with Christ in his glorious kingdom, which is yet to come in its fullness. God has given us the wonderful and beautiful gift of salvation, the light of eternal life that eliminates the darkness of sin and death, for which we were once destined. Amazing!

Loving God, thank you for calling us your people and for equipping us to be the church in our world today. Help us to see where you are at work in our homes and communities so that we may partner with you in building your kingdom here on earth. Amen.

GOD, THE PROVIDER (II)

“Do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.”
—Luke 12:11-12

There is a common misunderstanding in many churches. Many Christians think there is a big difference between proclaiming God’s Word from a pulpit and sharing his truth in a conversation. Similarly, lots of Christians think the apex of evangelism happens on a Sunday morning in a sanctuary and not in a coffee shop or in a car ride to work.

As Christians, we often think that to share the gift of salvation with someone, we first have to be qualified academically or be trained in a special way. As a result, we can get tangled up in our inabilities, bogged down by our insecurities, and overwhelmed with fears of failing ourselves, others, or—even worse—God.

But you aren’t called because you’re qualified; you’re qualified because you’ve been

called. Your life, regardless of religious education or ability to speak in public, is a testimony in itself. It’s the story of God’s redemption and restoration plan in you.

God knew you even before he established the foundations of the earth. He created you, wired you, and called you by name. God has adopted you as his child into his eternal family, and he has entrusted you with his kingdom work, which simply means sharing with someone the good news of forgiveness from sin and of new life in Christ forever. So share the good news today!

God, thank you for qualifying all of us whom you have called. Strengthen us by your Spirit to share the good news of your kingdom. Amen.

GOD, THE LOVING SERVANT

"A new command I give you: Love one another."

—John 13:34

Jesus' followers in the first century were the first people to be called "Christians." In addition to the apostles named in the New Testament, Jesus had many other disciples—men and women who witnessed his miraculous works, listened to the authority of his teaching, and were entrusted to carry on the mission he started. Christ's entire mission could be summed up in the simple command he gave to his disciples on the night before he was crucified.

Christ's disciples are still carrying on his mission today. The method may look different, but the message remains the same. The call to follow Jesus is the same today as it was that night: Christians are to love one another, just as Christ loved them. Christians are to set aside selfish desires and notions of religious entitlement and take on the role

of a servant, just as Jesus did for us. In the most profound way, Christians are to follow Jesus, past palisades of power and symbols of strength, to the cross, where our sin and shame are put to death and buried. The cross is where we hear the essential command to the Christian: "Love one another, just as I have loved you."

Lord of love, Savior of sinners, help us to love others the way you have loved us—selflessly and unconditionally. Amen.

GOD, THE PATIENT FORGIVER

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."
—Matthew 18:22

When I was invited to write this month's devotions, I accepted with eager anticipation. But I could not have known that I would soon also face a disruptive series of events that would turn this opportunity into an anxious task.

Pressure continued to build as my due date approached—and then passed. I struggled to find the motivation to keep writing, and a weight of guilt made things even worse.

Throughout this challenging time, however, the staff editor who worked with me remained encouraging, compassionate, prayerful, and forgiving. And, perhaps most of all, patience has been the constant thread woven into this experience for me.

This experience has reminded me of Jesus' response to Peter when he asked about forgiving

others. And it has helped me to see how patient a forgiving person can be, despite our own shortcomings at times.

Peter asked Jesus for guidance on how much patience we should give people who push situations past a reasonable limit to endure. And Jesus' answer reminds us of just how patient our heavenly Father is with us. Though we, in our sin and wrongdoing, have been God's enemies, he sent his own Son to give up his life for us so that we can have new life forever with him (Romans 5:8-11)!

Patient, forgiving King,
how often we fall short,
and how quick you are
to remind us of your
love. Thank you for your
patient, full forgiveness.
Help us to be patient in
forgiving others. Amen.

GOD, THE SEED PLANTER

“The seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.”
—Luke 8:15

It was evident from the tan lines on his arms that the man sitting across from me spent a lot of time outdoors. And a quick look at his hands showed the calluses, scars, and soil-stained fingers that came from a life of hard work on the farm. This man appeared to have lived a humble, strong, and yet simple life that didn't have much to offer the fast-paced world around him.

But how quickly that impression changed with just one conversation—for this humble farmer was far more than simple. He was a deep well of wisdom and experience, a lifelong follower of Jesus who had carefully tended the soil of his soul for over half a century. That soil was *really* good, and that man's heart had clearly allowed gospel seeds to be planted and to grow, producing beautiful fruit to be shared

with the people around him. The Spirit of God had clearly worked in this man's heart and life, and I was blessed by the fruit of his Christ-centered faith.

In what ways are you applying God's Word to your life, giving room for his seeds of love and goodness to grow and bear fruit that will draw others to seek and praise him?

Lord God, thank you for the seeds you have planted in our hearts through faith in your Son, Jesus. Send your Spirit to nurture and grow those seeds, and help us to bear fruit so that others can enjoy the goodness of life you want for us all forever. Amen.

GOD, THE RELIEF AID

We love because he first loved us.

—1 John 4:19

Eight-foot tables lined the sidewalk leading up to the local community center. They were divided into sections for clothes, canned goods, water, and other basic necessities. A young family gleaned some baby formula and pureed foods for their little child. Meanwhile, in the community center, a makeshift shelter was being built, with portable cots and chairs for people to rest on. Volunteers moved quickly, walking people who needed medical attention to the area where doctors and nurses were making health assessments.

The volunteers came from all walks of life and faith. The pastor of the local Baptist church and the rabbi from the synagogue nearby worked together to help an elderly couple find a seat. Outside, a group from the Knights of Columbus had partnered with a group of

Reformed church members to search for and rescue people's pets that were left behind as flood waters had forced residents to evacuate during a hurricane.

Though the storm had left a wide swath of disaster, God was at work restoring the devastated community. And this was the collective work of a group of people from many backgrounds who showed godly love because they knew God had first loved them.

God of rescue, protect and help all who are affected by disasters and devastation. And may your love for us overflow into the lives of people around us, that we may be known for showing your love in action. Amen.

GOD, THE ATTENTIVE FRIEND

In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly.
—1 Samuel 1:10

Many people can relate personally to the story of Hannah. The emotional, mental, and spiritual pain of infertility is all too common, and it is often held close like a distressing secret.

One of the most beautiful parts of Hannah's story is how God responded to her anguish and distress. Though Eli the high priest accused her of being drunk, God witnessed Hannah's pain and responded with abundant care and compassion. Instead of pointing the finger and keeping his distance, the infinite God of creation drew close to Hannah, embracing her and her grief. He listened to her heart. He heard her cry. He cared for her soul. And he gave Hannah what she longed for—a son.

Hannah is an example of someone who is unashamed to pour out their soul to the

Lord, because they know that he listens, hears, cares, and relieves even the deepest of pains.

As followers of Christ, we can share his love and compassion with others who are in distress. We can listen to their cries and help to carry their burdens, praying with them and helping them to find comfort in the God who loves us all.

Loving God, draw near to all who are hurting, and bring comfort to all who know the pain that Hannah felt. May they know that you hear them and care for them; fill and satisfy their souls with your mercy and grace. In the Savior's name, Amen.

GOD, THE SCENT SUPPLIER

We are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.

—2 Corinthians 2:15

“Have you *smelled* like Jesus lately?” This odd question can help us to think hard about living like Jesus did.

In some ways it can be easy to *look* like Jesus—that is, to imitate his actions. We can feed the hungry and give things to people who need them. We can offer a cup of cold water to someone who is thirsty, and we can forgive when we are wronged. These are righteous and good actions that all believers should aim to practice.

But what does it mean to *smell* like Jesus? Well, it’s not actually about having a smell or aroma. It’s about showing the love of God and the character of Jesus from deep within your heart and soul, and this leads others to respond in a way like people did when Jesus lived among them. If we represent Jesus as God calls us to, we are like “an aroma that brings life” to peo-

ple who are seeking God and open to his leading, and we are like “an aroma that brings death” to people who reject God and want nothing to do with him. Of course, we don’t want people to reject God. We hope that showing his love will help people see that God is good and wants to live with them forever. But some people still refuse, and that hurts God the most, for he is their Creator.

Like Christ, we are called to spread the good news of God’s love, and God is the one who supplies that in us—like giving us a smell or aroma that shows we are representing him, as Jesus himself did.

Father, spread your love and grace through us to show everyone who you are and how much you love them. Amen.

GOD, THE SHEPHERD IN THE SHADOW

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

In some translations of the Bible, the “darkest valley” in Psalm 23:4 is called “the valley of the shadow of death.” Regardless of the translation, the idea of a shadow-cast valley can be frightening. This imagery can remind us of a traumatic loss or a difficult crisis, and our memories of such things can be fearful and frightening.

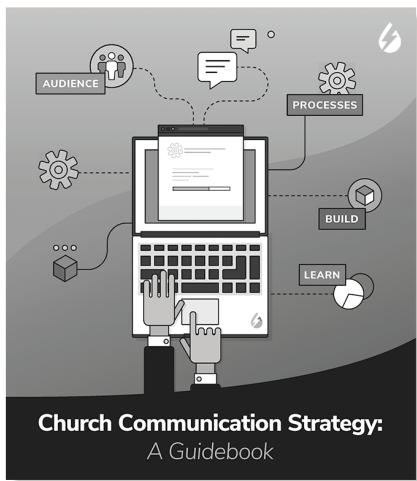
I recall a conversation I had with a widow not long after her spouse of nearly 60 years had passed away. While sitting at her kitchen table, surrounded by photos and stories of their life together, she shared with me her insight on Psalm 23. She spoke about the “valley of the shadow of death,” and how dark it can be when mourning the loss of a loved one. She talked about how quiet and still the house had become; how hard it was to stay in a

home filled with memories. It was heartbreaking to hear, yet she also shared a glimpse of hope she had discovered while traveling through that valley. The only way for a shadow to exist, she said, is for a source of light to be present. A shadow is not the absence of light, but rather the evidence of a light nearby. She also noted that the greater the source of light, the smaller the shadow that is cast.

Friends, I pray that whatever valley you may be in today or at some other time, the light of Christ may shine bigger and brighter—and that he may be the source of your strength.

Lord of light, shine your mercy and love into our darkest valleys, guiding us always to keep our eyes and hearts on you. Amen.

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