



Jan/Feb 2025

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

**BREAKING BARRIERS,
BUILDING BRIDGES**

ALSO: REMEMBERING IN DEUTERONOMY

Dear Friends:

Do you ever read from the Old Testament in the Bible and wonder what it means for your life today? Some parts of the Old Testament can be hard to understand.

This month Pastor Denise Posie explores the theme of “remembering” while reflecting on passages in the book of Deuteronomy. At the center of this exercise is remembering God’s covenant promises to be Israel’s God and for Israel to be his people. Through his mighty acts and miracles as well as his covenant law, God showed them and the surrounding nations what it means to live in fellowship with the Creator of the universe. Seeing God’s greatness, love, and mercy as he leads his people can deepen our own spiritual understanding as well.

In February, Pastor Stan Kruijs, who served as a missionary in Asia, reflects on some of the barriers that exist in presenting the good news of Jesus Christ to various people groups—and particularly to those who have never heard about Jesus. Exploring these challenges can also deepen our understanding of God’s amazing grace and our calling to share the good news of Jesus with the people around us.

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



Kurt Selles



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**“Remembering in
Deuteronomy”
Denise Posie**



**“Breaking Barriers,
Building Bridges”
Stan Kruis**

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**ReFrame
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february

Breaking Barriers, Building Bridges

Stan Kruis

This month we will focus on barriers that can block our relationships with God and with each other—and how those barriers can be overcome. We will also reflect on the many people in the world who have virtually no opportunity to hear the good news of salvation and peace with God and with each other through Christ. We call them unreached people groups. What are the barriers that prevent these people from receiving the gospel (the good news), and what are the bridges for overcoming those barriers?

In these meditations Stan Kruis draws on decades of cross-cultural experience and biblical reflection to offer insights on breaking barriers and building bridges.

Stan Kruis graduated from Calvin Theological Seminary in 1984 and began serving as a missionary in the Philippines, where he met his future wife, Bessie. Together they served in church planting and leadership training in the Philippines. After completing a Ph.D. in intercultural studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, Stan returned with Bessie to the Philippines in 2014, where he taught missions at the Asian Theological Seminary in Manila. Now retired, they live in Michigan. Stan and Bessie have two married children and one grandchild.

LOCKED OUT

The LORD God banished him from the Garden . . . [and] placed . . . cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.
—Genesis 3:23-24

God placed our first parents, Adam and Eve, in a beautiful garden filled with wonderful plants, wildlife, and abundant food (Genesis 2:8-25). God himself was present there and took walks with them in “the cool of the day”; but Adam and Eve fell into sin, disobeying God’s command to them (Gen. 3:1-11). And as we read at the end of Genesis 3, they were banished from the garden and locked out.

This can seem like pretty extreme punishment for just eating some forbidden fruit (see Genesis 2:16-17; 3:1-7). Actually, though, a lot more was involved. God had entrusted Adam and Eve with representing him by managing this beautiful garden—to develop and care for it. But they shifted their allegiance from the Creator to following the way of the enemy—Satan (see

Revelation 12:9). In doing this, they ruined their relationships with God, with each other, and with the creation. So God banished them and blocked the way to the garden.

Maybe you’ve been shut out—fired from a job, shunned by family members or neighbors, barred from society by imprisonment. Maybe you have been at fault, either partly or fully; or maybe you are innocent. Either way, it feels awful.

Thankfully, God provided a way to be reconciled with him. God sent his Son, Jesus, to defeat the devil and remove the barrier so that we can have fellowship with God again (Genesis 3:15; Hebrews 2:14-18).

Thank you, Jesus, for reopening the way into God’s presence. Amen.

BROKEN-HEARTED GOD

The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. —Genesis 6:6

Ancient Greek philosophers imagined a perfect supreme being. It would know everything and be in control of everything. It could not be influenced by people or other creatures, because that would imply weakness or lack of control. It could not have emotions or be truly responsive to humans. The Greeks called this supreme being God.

The early Christian church developed in a world that was heavily influenced by this Greek thinking. So Christian theologians often used those ideas to explain Christian teachings to Greek-minded people. Even today, our concepts of God tend to be influenced by those perspectives.

So when we come to a passage like Genesis 6:6, we might think, “What?! God regretted what he had done? He changed his mind? Human sin hurt God to

the depths of his heart?” That doesn’t fit well with our Greek-minded ideas of a perfect supreme being. So we try to explain such verses away and not take them at face value.

But God wants us to realize that our actions—good and bad—affect him. When I hurt a friend, that puts a barrier between me and that person. Similarly, our wrongs against God set up a barrier between us and him. As we confess our sins to God and receive his forgiveness through Jesus, let’s pause and realize that those sins have truly hurt him.

My sins have hurt you, Lord, and I’m sorry. Please work in me by your Holy Spirit so that my thoughts, words, and actions can bring you joy. In Christ, Amen.

THE CURTAIN IS TORN

When Jesus had cried out . . . in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.
—Matthew 27:50-51

At the moment Jesus died, the curtain in the temple was torn open “from top to bottom.” The temple represented God’s presence among his people. The innermost section was called the Most Holy Place, and God’s presence was focused especially in that room. A thick curtain separated it from the rest of the temple, and only one person, the high priest, could go into that room once a year, on the Day of Atonement, after going through an elaborate cleansing ceremony (Leviticus 16).

In a sense, that curtain was a lasting reminder of the barrier God had used to keep Adam and Eve from the garden when they had fallen into sin. It wasn’t that God didn’t want people in his presence. The problem was that because of sin, no person could survive in God’s presence. God’s holiness

and purity cannot mix with human sinfulness.

But Jesus’ death for our sake changed all that. Hebrews 10:19 puts it this way: “We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body. . . .” Jesus took away our sin by his death, opening the way for us to approach God again and enjoy life in him.

The way is open. Have you entered?

Thank you, Jesus, for laying down your life to open the way for me to enjoy fellowship with God and abundant life with you now and forever! Amen.

EVERY NATION, PEOPLE, AND LANGUAGE

Before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.
—Revelation 7:9

God gave the apostle John a magnificent vision of a diverse multitude—people from every part of the human family—forming a great chorus worshipping the Lord and proclaiming his victory over evil.

This vision portrays what believers in Christ have been laboring and praying for through the centuries. The goal of God's mission in Christ is that people from all over the earth will receive his salvation and worship him. But this great chorus is not yet complete. Not all of God's people are gathered in; many are missing. There are still language groups and people groups that have no followers of Jesus.

The original Greek word used for "nation" in the New Testament is *ethnos*, from which our word "ethnic" comes. Sometimes *ethnos* refers to

major countries in Bible times, like Egypt, Syria, and Persia. Sometimes it is translated as "Gentiles," referring to non-Jewish groups of people. And sometimes *ethnos* refers to smaller cultural and linguistic groups. One country can include many such groups.

So even though there are Christians in every country on earth today, there are still many people and language groups that have no Christians. As Jesus' followers, we need to bring the gospel (the good news of Jesus) to them. What role does God want you to play in this task?

Use me, Lord, in your great mission to bring people from every group on earth into your family. In Jesus, Amen.

EMPOWERED TO BE CHRIST'S WITNESSES

"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."
—Acts 1:8

Here Jesus tells his followers that his purpose in sending the Holy Spirit is to empower them to be his witnesses. They are to bring the good news of his coming kingdom "to the ends of the earth." Jesus' witnesses testify to what they have seen, learned, and experienced, describing how the Lord has worked in their life and in this world.

In the book of Acts, as we read about the spread of the good news, we observe Jesus' followers giving testimony about how they have experienced God working—through healings, answers to prayer, transformed hearts, and changed lives.

As Jesus' followers, we grow in Christ by the work of the Spirit in our lives, and we become "good news" people. The message of God's work in our lives and the Bible's message about

God's grace in Christ become powerful aids in our witness to others. People are drawn to stories about personal experience. Sharing our stories can break down barriers and build bridges to help others know the Lord.

In what ways are you experiencing God's work in your life, and how will you share that with others?

Ask God's Spirit to reveal how he is working in you, and to help you see what he is calling you to do. We all need the Spirit to work powerfully in us as his witnesses.

Spirit of God, work in us to shape us into the image of Christ. Guide us to share with others how you are working in our lives. In Jesus, Amen.

THE WAFFLE PROBLEM

[Jesus] himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.

—Ephesians 2:14

When you pour syrup on a breakfast waffle, the little ridges and squares in the waffle catch the syrup and keep it from spreading out evenly. So you end up putting lots of syrup on your waffle, and that may not be so good for your health. On a pancake the syrup spreads more easily.

The world is more like a waffle than a pancake. A map of Nigeria, for example, showing where the various ethnic groups live, would look like a waffle—except that the lines wouldn't be straight. Now, we might think that when the good news of Jesus enters a country, it can easily spread all over. But barriers between the groups, like differences in language, culture, and history—and sometimes hostility—can make it difficult for the gospel to be shared with everyone.

In the early church there was a huge barrier between Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews). The Spirit of God had to work hard in Jesus' followers to get them to cross that barrier. As Ephesians 2 points out, Jesus destroyed that barrier through his death so that people of all groups can be reconciled to God and to one another. But putting that teaching into practice is not easy.

What are the barriers in your life that can tend to block friendships and the sharing of God's love with other people?

Lord, overcome any attitudes and fears in me that can set up barriers and prevent me from connecting with people who are different from me. In Jesus, Amen.

LANGUAGES ARE FUN!

“Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?” —Acts 2:7-8

When I arrived in Iloilo City in the Philippines, I lived with a Filipino family for several months. They had two girls, ages 5 and 6, who loved having a *kuya* (older brother) in their home. When they started unexpectedly entering my room to chat with me, I realized that boundaries were needed. So I said in Ilonggo, “You need to ask first before entering my room.” Then they would approach my door and ask questions like “Do you have any sisters?” and “Where were you born?”—and then they would come right in.

I soon realized that I had used the wrong word for “ask.” I had used the word for “asking a question,” but I should have used the word for “asking permission.” It can be tricky to learn a new language!

Because the language barrier is so common, it’s symbolic of

other barriers between people groups. It’s also the first barrier that was broken when the Holy Spirit was poured out on Jesus’ followers. The Spirit enabled the disciples to speak in other languages so that all who had gathered from other nations could hear the good news in their native tongues.

That miracle of language has happened in rare moments in mission history. But normally, missionaries like me have to spend many months learning the local language. It can be hard, but it can also be fun! And it’s a very important bridge for sharing the gospel.

Lord, help missionaries who are learning a new language. And may all of us listen more attentively and speak more clearly to overcome barriers between us. Amen.

CROSSING THE BRIDGE FROM DEATH TO LIFE

“Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and . . . has crossed over from death to life.”

—John 5:24

I was with a group going house to house in the Philippines to share the way of salvation. We used simple tracts that featured the Bridge Illustration—showing Jesus as the bridge from death to life. In the doorway of a palm-thatched house I spoke with a middle-aged woman and her teenage daughter, who was nursing an infant.

The illustration pictured a chasm with a cliff on each side. One cliff represented death, with a figure of a man on it; and the other cliff represented life, with a symbol for God on it. The chasm represented sin, which separates us from God. The illustration then showed a cross—representing Jesus—bridging the chasm. Focusing on our text-verse for today, I explained to the mother and daughter that by putting our faith in Jesus, we cross that bridge from death to life.

“Where are you in relation to life, death, and the bridge?” I asked them. They pointed to the center of the bridge—half-way across the chasm. I went on to explain that Jesus spoke in the past tense, saying, “has crossed over”—and this means that we already have eternal life right now through faith in Jesus. They weren’t so sure about that, but they were interested to learn more.

Where are you in relation to death, life, and the bridge (Jesus)?

Lord Jesus, strengthen our faith to trust in you alone to bring us from death to life, and please give us the assurance of eternal life today. In your name, Amen.

LINKS IN A SALVATION CHAIN

The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah." . . . And he brought him to Jesus.
—John 1:41-42

The first time Sharon came to our Bible study group in Beijing, she introduced herself this way: "My name is Sharon. I'm not a Christian yet, but I want to know how to become one."

God was obviously working in Sharon's life before she came to our group. She was seeing Christ at work in people around her, and someone had brought her to our group. It's something like what happened when Andrew met Jesus and then went to tell his brother Peter so that he could meet Jesus too.

For most people, coming to Christ is a process that includes many steps. God uses lots of different people in our lives, like links in a chain. As links, believers might do one or more of the following to help bring a person to Christ: show-

ing neighborly love and care; sharing about an answer to prayer; sharing a favorite Bible passage and what it means personally; inviting the person to study the Bible; explaining the message of salvation and how God invites us to turn away from sin to receive new life in Christ.

How do you think God could use you as a link in a chain that can bring another person to Christ? Or if you're like Sharon was, tell a Christian friend or leader, "I'm not a Christian yet, but I want to know how to become one"—and they'll tell you!

Lord, use us to share your love and good news to help bring people closer to you. May we all faithfully draw others to find life in you. Amen.

YES, I DO!

The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
—Romans 6:23

We didn't overload Sharon (see Feb. 9) right away with all kinds of information on how to become a Christian when she first attended our group. We simply explained the way of salvation and knew that the Holy Spirit would keep working in her to bring her to faith in Christ.

During those weeks I was training our group members in several ways to present the way of salvation. One day I explained how we can use Romans 6:23 in a one-verse method to share the gospel. Working through the verse phrase by phrase as I sketched a cross on a whiteboard, I showed how we can explain this verse to others.

"Wages must be paid," I said; "they're not optional. And death is the required wage, or result, of sin. Gifts, however, are optional. The giver can opt to give—and once a gift is

offered, a person can opt to receive it or not. God offers eternal life through Christ and his death on the cross."

"At this point," I said to the group, "you can ask the person who is listening, 'Do you want to receive this gift?'"

Then immediately Sharon raised her hand and exclaimed, "I do!" So, right there and then, Sharon received Christ as her Lord and Savior. She later returned to her home town, and before long she called us to ask how she could start a group like ours in her new location. She was ready to share with others what she had learned.

Lord, there are people around us who need you. Help us to explain your salvation to them in a simple, clear way. Amen.

“WHY HASN’T ANYONE COME TO TELL US?”

*How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?
And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?*

—Romans 10:14

In the Philippines there was a tribal group in the mountains that had never heard the good news of Jesus. Some of our missionary friends learned that the chieftain, who communicated with demonic spirits, performed a yearly sacrifice and scattered blood around the community as an atonement for the bad things people had done toward each other. They believed that one day a savior would come to do away with the need for the yearly sacrifice.

An elderly woman in the tribe had told our friends all of this, and they were able to explain to her that the Savior had already come. “What is his name?” she asked. “And when did he come?”

“His name is Jesus,” they said, “and he came 2,000 years ago.”

“Then why didn’t anyone come to tell us?” she asked. There was anger in her voice; their tribe had been waiting so long. And then she and many other members of the tribe came to faith in Jesus.

In Romans 10, Paul explains that if people believe the gospel message and call on the Lord to rescue them, they will be saved. In addition, the church of Jesus needs to send messengers who will preach the good news.

Some people are still waiting to hear the good news. What is your role in the work of sharing the gospel with them?

Lord, show us how you want to use us in sharing the good news with people who have not heard. And may we serve you faithfully. Amen.

JESUS, THE WAY TO SALVATION

"I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins. . . ." —Acts 26:17-18

Here the apostle Paul describes how his life turned around when he met Jesus. The Lord called him to be a witness to the Gentiles (non-Jews) so that they too could receive salvation. And Paul did that for the rest of his life.

Jesus calls us, too, to spread the good news that he came to save us. But this is highly unpopular in our world today. Many countries outlaw the direct preaching and teaching of Christ's message to the world. Even in countries that have freedom of religion, it is seen as intolerant to say that Jesus is the way to salvation.

But Scripture is clear on this. Jesus himself said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). And his disciples declared, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no

other name under heaven [besides Jesus'] . . . by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Now, this does not mean that people have to convert to one particular denomination or brand of Christianity. It simply means that people need to believe in Jesus to be saved to eternal life.

If you are trusting anyone or anything else for salvation, please put your trust fully in Jesus Christ alone. Through his death and resurrection he became the one and only bridge from death to life.

Jesus, thank you for laying down your life to become the way of salvation. May we witness faithfully, drawing others to trust in you alone. In your name, Amen.

WELCOME!

A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows. . . . God sets the lonely in families, he leads out the prisoners with singing. . . .

—Psalm 68:5-6

“Welcome to the family; we’re glad that you have come to share your life with us as we grow in love. . . .”

During my first year in the Philippines, I often heard this song at the beginning or end of a worship service, as people in church would go around shaking hands and welcoming new people. I was single and a foreigner, and at times I felt lonely. I truly felt welcomed through the use of this song, and by the welcoming Filipino culture that excelled in hospitality and family ties.

Psalm 68 mentions some of God’s concerns for marginalized people—widows, orphans, the lonely, and prisoners. God often gave his people instructions about caring for such persons. And that made a big difference in people’s lives. Today’s marginalized and vul-

nerable people include immigrants, refugees, the homeless, international students, and more. God wants us to welcome everyone and help them in their need.

Welcoming people into our neighborhoods, churches, homes, and lives is one of the greatest ways to overcome barriers that can keep people at a distance from the gospel.

Who are the lonely people around you? How welcoming is your church toward strangers? Ask a first-time visitor for their feedback.

Lord, you’ve welcomed us into your family by your grace in Christ. Work in us to open our hearts, homes, and lives to strangers. Amen.

LOVE, RESPECT, AND THE IMAGE OF GOD

*The commandments . . . are summed up in this one command:
“Love your neighbor as yourself.”* —Romans 13:9

I thank God for the opportunities I've had to visit many countries and to live in several of them for a long while. All of this has given me a fascination for cultural differences.

The differences in food alone can delight the palate (or sometimes unsettle the stomach). Some societies are egalitarian; others are hierarchical. Some encourage dependence on one another, emphasizing community; others encourage independence and individualism. There are also differences in marriage roles, gender roles, family, work, and finance—the list goes on and on.

What has impressed me, though, is that in all societies people want to experience significance and fulfillment. They want to use their talents in ways that others appreciate. All societies love their children. All want to love and be

loved—and not only to survive but also to thrive.

One reason for this is that God has made each of us like himself in some special ways. We are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). So, in spite of sin's damage, we can still detect in good ways the image of God in every person. A bottom line in both interpersonal and intercultural relationships is to respect each person as an imagebearer of God.

This can then lead us to love everyone as ourselves. These basic principles give us a foundation for bridge building that overcomes barriers. Do you see God's likeness in every person you meet?

Lord, you have made us all in your image. Help us to love everyone, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

“WE ARE GOD’S LIGHT IN THIS PLACE”

You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth). . . . —Ephesians 5:8-9

For a few years we rented a small fourth-floor apartment in a five-story tenement in Manila, the Philippines. Jason, the building manager, was a follower of Jesus. He led adult Sunday school classes in his church at times, and because I was a seminary teacher he would sometimes ask me for help in planning his lessons.

During our stay there, we had a problem with the occupants above us. I don't even remember what the problem was, but I can't forget Jason's response when I asked for his advice. He said, "We have to be careful how we handle this. We are God's light in this place. Let's not be confrontational." With that advice, we were able to talk cordially with our neighbor and resolve the matter.

Jason's words "We are God's light in this place" remind me

of Paul's words in our Bible passage today. I am also reminded that Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. . . . Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:14-16). Knowing that we are God's agents in this world can transform our lives and our relationships. Living "as children of light," we can shine God's light into the darkness in the world around us.

How will you shine the light of Christ to others today?

Lord, keep us from sin and make your light in us shine brightly in this dark world—for your glory and as a witness to others. In Jesus' name, Amen.

HOSPITALITY BRIDGES BARRIERS

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.
—Hebrews 13:2

During my first year as a missionary on Panay Island in the Philippines, while I was still single, I heard someone knocking at my gate. It was Pastor Raul and his wife, Valerie, and they informed me that they would stay with me for a few days. Raul had been one of my students a couple years earlier on Negros Island. They had arrived a few days early for a conference.

I was astounded and didn't know what to say! I wasn't used to having someone show up at my home unannounced and say they were going to stay with me. But I had an extra room, and there was no real reason to turn them away—so somehow the Lord led me to say, "Okay."

It helped that I understood that Filipinos are masters at hospitality (so I needed to learn from

them). In addition, I soon realized that, of course, there was no phone for informing me in advance, and that my guests wouldn't expect too much of me. Though this called for a change of plans and some extra effort on my part, it worked out fine, and I was blessed by my guests' presence.

Hospitality bridges all kinds of barriers in amazing ways, especially in cross-cultural situations. And it's about opening not only our homes but also our hearts. The gospel often travels easily across this bridge.

Help us, Lord, to discover the joys of opening our homes and hearts to others. May we honor you in sharing the gifts you give us. Amen.

THE OTHER SIDE OF HOSPITALITY

"When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.' . . . Stay there, eating and drinking whatever they give you."

—Luke 10:5-7

We were heading south from Bacolod City in the Philippines, convoying with other vehicles for a church retreat. As we entered Valladolid, I found that our car's brakes weren't working. So we hobbled into a service station near the center of town. "Sure, we can fix it," they said. "Don't worry." But I did worry. I didn't know if I could trust them to do the job well, and I wondered if they might take advantage and overcharge us.

After a long wait, the work was done. "How much?" I asked. "Oh, you don't need to pay!" they said. But after some negotiation they let me pay some of the cost. Then we were on our way, and we didn't have brake trouble again. With traditional Filipino hospitality, the service station was very generous to me as a foreigner. I still feel ashamed for my lack of trust.

As we cross borders and barriers to share the good news of Jesus, we will often be guests—in homes, neighborhoods, and countries other than our own. And being good guests, by honoring and trusting our hosts, will help to build strong bridges for friendship and sharing the gospel.

If you travel to a different land, where perhaps the people have a different culture and religion, consider arranging a homestay with local people. Get to know your hosts, be a good guest, and watch barriers come down.

Lord, help us to be good guests, and give us wisdom as we seek to love and trust others, in your name. Amen.

“HEAL THE SICK”

“Heal the sick who are there and tell them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’”
—Luke 10:9

As a missionary, I sometimes traveled with health-care workers from the Luke Society, a medical mission organization, to remote villages in the Philippines. There we met people who usually didn't have access to healthcare. The Luke Society workers were able to diagnose and treat illnesses and provide dental care, and we all shared the love and good news of salvation in Christ. Sometimes this work resulted in the planting of new churches as well.

Through the centuries, many new believers have cited physical healing as a significant factor in coming to faith in Christ, especially in frontier mission locations where there were few Christians and few doctors. Such healing—whether through miraculous gifts or through professional health care—aligns with Jesus' instruc-

tions to heal the sick. This is an essential part of bringing the gospel. The good news of God's kingdom is about wholeness in all aspects of life, now and forever.

In mission work today we use the term “kingdom professionals” for people who are called to reach people for Christ through their profession. They are trained not only in the Bible and missions, but also in professional skills that can give them access to unreached people whom traditional missionaries might not be able to reach. Perhaps you are one, or you may become one.

Lord, guide us to use our gifts, training, and experience to be your mission agents wherever we are and wherever you may lead us. Amen.

PRISCILLA AND AQUILA

When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.

—Acts 18:26

Aquila and Priscilla were an amazing couple. They were not missionaries or ministers. They were tentmakers (or leather workers) by trade—lay-people who were used mightily by the Lord. They moved from Rome to Corinth, where Paul met them. He was also a tentmaker, so he lived and worked with them.

After some time, Paul moved on to Ephesus, and Priscilla and Aquila went with him. Paul didn't stay long, but they remained and served the church there. When Apollos, a highly educated new believer, came, he was quite effective in ministry, but his teaching about Jesus needed some correction. So Priscilla and Aquila invited him to their home and helped him get on track. Apollos later proved to be a helpful teacher of the good news.

From the greetings in Paul's letters, we know that a church in Ephesus met in Priscilla and Aquila's home (1 Corinthians 16:19). They returned to Rome, and a church also met in their home there. Paul adds that they were his coworkers and had risked their lives for him (Romans 16:3-5). Later they were back in Ephesus again (2 Timothy 4:19).

Aquila and Priscilla moved a lot, and wherever they went, they opened their home so that people could worship together. They mentored other leaders while working behind the scenes. God needs people like them in his mission today too. Could you be one?

Lord, use my gifts and resources in whatever way you please to share the good news. Amen.

WHEN OUR STUFF BECOMES A BARRIER

“Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts—no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals. . . .”

—Matthew 10:9-10

Did Jesus really mean this—to bring nothing extra when we travel for mission work? Do those instructions still apply to us today? When I travel for mission work, I usually pack to the limit (sometimes more).

Roger Greenway, a missionary to Sri Lanka many years ago, recounted how his family had tried to ship their belongings from the United States in 18 barrels and two big crates—but the shipment was delayed by four months. In the meantime, they landed in Sri Lanka and learned that they could get along quite well without most of that stuff. Their dependence on local resources also helped them develop friendships with local people.

When their baggage finally arrived, they were suddenly viewed by their neighbors as very wealthy people whose

standard of living was much higher than the locals'. All that stuff actually created barriers between them and the people they had come to serve. Greenway later advised missionaries to be careful about what kind of message their belongings would send to others.

Considering this, it's not surprising that for many centuries Christian missionaries made a vow of poverty. But this lesson applies to us all—what does our stuff and our lifestyle tell others about our priorities? Are we seeking first the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33)?

Lord, thank you for your gifts to us. Help us to be generous and to let go of our stuff if it could become a barrier to serving you and others. Amen.

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

“You will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth.”

—Acts 1:8

After removing the barrier between us and God, Jesus commissioned his followers to bring this good news everywhere. The book of Acts tells about the early years of this mission. By the power of God’s Spirit, Jesus’ followers overcame barriers and discovered bridges to bring the good news and make disciples far and wide. And they, in turn, spread the message to make more disciples.

You would think that by now the mission would be complete, that the good news would have reached everywhere. Today there are Christians in every country of the world, but there are still about 2 billion people—a quarter of the world’s population—who have virtually no opportunity to receive the gospel. They are in various people groups (like ethnic groups) that haven’t been exposed to the gospel because of ongoing barriers.

Some of those barriers are in the groups themselves—like devotion to false religions, and misconceptions about Jesus. Some other barriers are more common—such as language and cultural barriers, and laws against preaching the gospel.

In addition, we can have barriers that stop us from reaching out to other groups (including people around us who don’t know Christ)—apathy, fear, racism, and preoccupations with our personal lives.

Let’s pray for God’s help in overcoming these barriers.

Lord, please break down the many barriers that prevent people from receiving the gospel, and free us from barriers in ourselves that can hold us back. Amen.

IS THE CHURCH ITSELF A BARRIER?

“Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering.” —Luke 11:52

Jesus spoke pointedly and critically against the leaders of God’s people in that day. Instead of helping people draw near to God and enjoy his blessings, those leaders put up barriers through their legalistic, self-serving practices.

Sadly, throughout history, some churches and church leaders have blocked access to spiritual life for people and have even abused people. We often hear of such cases in the news today. Corrupt leaders put barriers instead of bridges in front of people. As God’s people who make up the church today, we must repent of these sins, be sure we have measures in place to prevent them from happening again, and be agents of healing to people who have been hurt.

Have you been hurt by the church or its leaders? If so, you may be hesitant to participate

in the life of a church. That’s understandable.

What can you do? Here are some suggestions: (1) Keep your focus on Jesus himself, especially through prayer and Bible reading. (2) Ask God to provide a few caring Christians with whom you can fellowship and grow spiritually; they can be a helpful bridge. (3) Through a Christian counselor, seek healing and strength to forgive. (4) Remain open to a time when you can fully participate in a healthy church again.

Forgive us, Lord, if we have acted as barriers instead of bridges. Bring healing to all who have been hurt by the church. Infuse us all with your love and grace. Amen.

CREATIVE BRIDGE MAKING

“Take an iron pan, place it as an iron wall between you and the city and turn your face toward it. It will be under siege, and you shall besiege it. This will be a sign to the people of Israel.”

—Ezekiel 4:3

God told the prophet Ezekiel to act out various scenes as signs of punishment that the people would face because of their unfaithfulness. Each scene gave a nonverbal demonstration that the people could understand as it was acted out. And the dramatic effect was often powerful.

One highlight of our ministry in the Philippines was to work with young adults in discipleship. A group on Negros Island developed an evangelistic team that they called Halieus (“Fishermen”). They practiced pantomime presentations (sometimes in our home) portraying the gospel story. Then they worked with churches to hold rallies in local neighborhoods where they presented the pantomimes. A shiver would go up and down my spine when I watched them.

God used them to open the hearts of people for whom words alone were inadequate.

One reason why some people groups have not been reached, or have not responded to the gospel, is that typical strategies are not effective with them. To bridge those barriers, we need to understand the people and their culture more deeply, and to find creative strategies that can reach their hearts. That can also be true close to home, with people who live with us and around us.

Lord, guide us in developing effective strategies to reach people who need to know you. Help us to understand how to share the good news in creative ways. Amen.

BEAUTIFUL FEET

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!"

—Isaiah 52:7

One day in 1987 the rain poured down as we made our way to a church workers meeting in a little chapel on Panay Island in the Philippines. The chapel was separated from the nearest road by a kilometer of rice fields. We took off our shoes and socks, rolled up our pantlegs, and walked across the fields on little dikes between the rice paddies. I was not skilled at this, and my foot slipped into a muddy paddy several times.

The meeting was a monthly gathering for fellowship and mutual encouragement—and sometimes problem solving—for leaders from 10 churches on the island. It was a warm time of worship, sharing, and prayer. I won't forget the tasty *sinuk mani* (a sweet rice treat) served on banana leaves by the host church that day.

Then we walked back across the rice fields. Soaked again

with rain, I took a picture of my muddy feet. Later I sent copies, with Isaiah 52:7 written on them, to the churches that were supporting me.

When we get involved in God's mission, muddy feet and rain-soaked clothes may be among the least of the challenges we face. But they won't measure up to the joys of sharing the good news and gathering for fellowship with believers in remote places.

Where is God leading you to bring the good news?

Thank you, Lord, for the joys of cross-cultural fellowship. Be with mission workers who may be struggling with cultural-adjustment challenges today. In Jesus, Amen.

PRAY FOR HARVEST WORKERS

[Jesus] said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." —Matthew 9:37-38

We were living in Beijing to learn Mandarin, the official language of China. We weren't planning to do anything else, but the English fellowship in the church we were attending asked us to start a new small group Bible study. It grew rapidly, and soon people were coming to faith in Christ.

They needed to be baptized, so we also led a class for preparation for baptism. Then they needed to be discipled, so we led a discipleship class. The church also asked us to train others to lead small groups. The work was beginning to pile up, becoming more than we could do. It was a happy kind of problem, but still a problem.

The responsiveness to the gospel made it obvious that many people were ready—or nearly ready—to be harvested into

God's family. But there were not enough harvest workers—just as Jesus said 2,000 years ago.

Research has shown that in general, people in unreached people groups (where there is little or no opportunity to receive the gospel) are more responsive than other nonbelieving populations when the gospel is presented. Cross-cultural mission workers need to be trained and mobilized to meet this great need.

Pray faithfully and diligently that God—the Lord of the harvest—will raise up harvest workers.

Lord, as you prepare people to open their hearts to you, show each of us how you want to use us as harvesters. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

HOW TO PRAY FOR MISSIONARIES

Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel.

—Ephesians 6:19

In today's passage we see that Paul—one of the great missionaries of the early church—needed prayer partners, and he probably had many. Today's text gives us a helpful start on how to pray for missionaries and other gospel workers.

We can pray that God will give them the right words (relevant and effective messages); that they will make known the true gospel (free of false teachings); and that they will proclaim it courageously (knowing when to challenge false ideas and practices, and when to leave it to the Holy Spirit to convict people of the truth).

In the film *Schindler's List*, Oskar Schindler was able to prevent many Jews from going to the gas chambers in World War II. But toward the end of the film, he sobs, saying, "I didn't do enough. . . . I could have saved

more." Missionaries can have similar guilt feelings about people they haven't reached or work left undone. Ask God to give them peace and to leave the unfinished work in his hands, guiding them to see the right priorities. May God show them bridges that will overcome barriers; provide healthy family relationships, friendships, and connections with fellow workers; and supply guidance for training local leaders to continue the ministries.

Let's stay connected with our missionaries, receive their prayer concerns, and pray faithfully for them.

Lord, strengthen and encourage all your gospel workers. Bless them with joy in serving you. In Christ's name, Amen.

WHEN THE DAILY NEWS GETS US DOWN

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

—Matthew 24:14

Sometimes I get discouraged when I hear about so much evil in our world—there’s so much injustice, godlessness, suffering, immorality, corruption, and more. When doubts start to rise in my mind, I want to cry out, “Lord, where are you? It doesn’t seem like you’re doing much about it, and it’s getting worse by the day.”

But then I recall what Jesus told his disciples when they asked about the future, and I realize that this is exactly what we should expect—wars, calamities, and opposition toward God’s people. And Jesus points out that the main thing that needs to happen before the end is that the gospel needs to be proclaimed everywhere. Later Jesus commissioned his followers, saying, “Go and make disciples of all nations . . .” (Matthew 28:19). And this task is for every gen-

eration of Jesus’ followers, including you and me.

The best way to deal with our doubts and worries about what’s happening in the world is to get busy with the work Jesus has given us to do until he comes again. That means proclaiming the good news of God’s kingdom—that we are saved through God’s grace in Christ—and backing that up with the consistent, credible witness of showing God’s love in our everyday lives.

Come, Lord Jesus, to bring the fullness of your kingdom here on earth. And empower us to be faithful and effective in spreading your love and good news everywhere. Amen.

SO MUCH MORE TO COME!

“There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” . . . “I am making everything new!”
—Revelation 21:4-5

Jesus has removed the barrier to reconciliation with God, so we can enjoy fellowship with God and abundant life in his kingdom even now. And yet there's much more to come! When a believer in Christ dies, we grieve their loss. But we know they are in the Lord's presence in a greater way than we experience now. So while death brings sadness, it has become, through Christ, a bridge into God's presence.

And there's still more! When Jesus comes again, all believers—those who have died and those who are still alive—will be transformed physically and spiritually, with glorious, imperishable bodies (1 Corinthians 15:50-55).

God will bring his “New Jerusalem” to a renewed earth, where he will live with his people forever. There will be

no more death, mourning, crying, or pain, because the Lord will make everything new.

What about Judgment Day? Yes, it's coming (Revelation 20:11-15), but “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). So it's crucially important that we surrender ourselves to Christ and accept his free gift of salvation.

Then we can serve him with our whole lives, urging everyone to turn to God in repentance and faith so that they too may have eternal life. In the Lord we can live in hope and anticipation and without fear.

Lord Jesus, transform us so that we may live fully for you, sharing your love and good news everywhere. Amen.

NOTES

NOTES

Prayer doesn't have to be complicated.
It's an intimate conversation between
you and God.



“How Do I Pray?”
a guidebook with six ways to
reinvigorate your prayer life.

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