



# Today

Sept/Oct 2024

refresh, refocus, renew

YOU ARE  
MY WITNESSES

ALSO: RESPONDING TO GRACE

Dear Friends:

Jesus not only loves us and gave his life for us; he also calls us to join him in sharing his love with the world and renewing his creation. While Jesus' call to join him in mission may overwhelm us, he has promised us his presence and has given us the Holy Spirit to guide us. He also calls us together as the church, his living body throughout the earth, to work together to bring his rule on earth as it is in heaven.



In September, Pastor Kevin DeRaaf, director of Resonate Global Mission, reminds us that Jesus calls some of us to serve him in faraway places while he calls many, many others to share his love at home, right where they are. And in these devotions we discover anew that wherever Jesus calls us, we have opportunities to share his love with all kinds of people around us.

In October, Pastor Marc Nabié explores the theme of gratitude, one of the most important qualities of the Christian life. Focusing on Ephesians 4-6, Pastor Nabié, director of ReFrame Ministries' French-language media ministry in Burkina Faso, West Africa, highlights practical aspects of gratitude, such as humility, graciousness, unity, and service. Exploring gratitude encourages and challenges each of us to embrace the new life offered in Christ and to let gratitude flow from our hearts because of all that Jesus has done for us.

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

# Today

Sept/Oct 2024

refresh, refocus, renew



**“You Are My Witnesses”**  
**Kevin DeRaaf**



**“Responding to Grace”**  
**Marc Nabié**

**Managing Editor:** Jeff Bulthuis  
**Executive Editor:** Kurt Selles

TODAY (USPS 185-140),  
Volume 74, Number 5,  
published bimonthly by  
ReFrame Ministries, formerly  
Back to God Ministries  
International, at 1700 28th  
Street SE, Grand Rapids, MI  
49508-1407. Periodicals postage  
paid at Grand Rapids, Michigan,  
and at additional mailing offices.

Postmaster: Send address changes  
to Today, 1700 28th Street SE,  
Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407.

Copyright © 2024, Reframe  
Ministries. Printed in U.S.A.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture  
quotations in this publication  
are from The Holy Bible, New  
International Version®, NIV®.  
Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984,  
2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by  
permission. All rights reserved  
worldwide.

Photo: [unsplash.com](https://unsplash.com)  
(Matt Howard)



**ReFrame**  
**Ministries**

is the new name of  
Back to God Ministries International

# october

## Responding to Grace

**Marc Nabié**

This month we explore the theme of gratitude while focusing on Ephesians 4-6. These devotional readings also prompt us to reflect on various Scripture passages to highlight many aspects of living a life of gratitude, including practical actions like showing humility, being gracious, striving for unity, and serving others.

Drawing from Scripture and from experience as a ministry leader in Burkina Faso, Marc Nabié emphasizes the call to respond to God's grace by living transformed lives. He challenges us to examine our relationships, actions, and attitudes in light of God's mercy and love.

Through reflections on honesty, self-control, and generosity, these devotions encourage readers to embrace the new life offered in Christ, embodying gratitude in every aspect of daily living. Because of Christ's saving work on the cross, we are called to live out our gratitude in ways that reflect the transforming power of God's grace.

*Marc Nabié is the French-language ministry leader for ReFrame Ministries. He joined the French ministry team in Burkina Faso in 2015. He previously served as a church pastor as the director of the Léo Bible School. He has also been instrumental in planting churches in five villages in Burkina Faso. Marc received a degree in theology from Faculté Jean Calvin in France. He and his wife, Jocelyn, have three children.*

## RESPONDING WITH GRATITUDE

*I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.*

—Ephesians 4:1

I live in the country of Burkina Faso. In Sabou, a village west of the capital, Ouagadougou, the crocodiles are considered sacred. No one in the village kills them, and the crocodiles never attack the villagers. This relationship is so reliable that tourists can take pictures sitting on the crocodiles of Sabou without risk of injury.

A traditional story explains this relationship between the villagers and the crocodiles. It is said that a crocodile once saved the life of the village ancestor. In gratitude, this man ordered his descendants never to harm the crocodile, and this tradition is still alive. In other words, the man was so filled with gratitude for his life that he committed to honor and protect the crocodile.

Throughout this month we will focus on the theme of gratitude as we reflect on passages

in the book of Ephesians. In chapters 1-3 the apostle Paul shows how we were dead in our sins and how God—in his mercy—has given us new life in Christ by pure grace. Then in chapter 4, Paul urges us to respond with gratitude to this good news.

How can we show appreciation for the gift of new life that God has made possible for us? And, like the village ancestor, how can we show our children and others around us how to live in gratitude?

Gracious God, we thank you for the great gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. Thank you for showing us mercy and grace. Help us to live thankfully and to share this good news with our families, neighbors, friends, and others everywhere. Amen.

## GRACE AND GENEROSITY

*Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.*  
—Ephesians 4:2

In Jesus' day people despised the local tax collectors for collaborating with the Romans, who had taken over their nation. The tax collectors could also overcharge people in order to pay themselves, so they often got rich at the expense of their local community.

When Jesus came to visit, he shocked Zacchaeus, the local tax collector, and everyone in the crowd by inviting himself to stay at Zacchaeus's house. In this way Jesus showed Zacchaeus great honor and respect, and that turned Zacchaeus's life around. The tax collector stood up and acknowledged his wrongdoing, made amends, and gave half of his wealth to the poor. What joy in the city of Jericho!

Zacchaeus met grace in the person of Jesus, who accepted and honored him instead of rejecting him. He was over-

whelmed and humbled, and immediately he became generous to the people around him.

In Ephesians, Paul invites us to live a life that responds to God's grace. He calls Christians to be humble, gentle, and patient. As people who have received generous grace, we are called to live gracious lives. God's grace to us fuels us to show grace and generosity to others.

How does the grace you receive affect your relationships with the people around you? What can you do to show humility and gentleness in your relationships at home, at work or school, and in the church?

Jesus, thank you for showing us grace despite our many sins. By your Spirit, empower us to show grace to everyone we meet today. Amen.

## UNITY AND PEACE

*Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.*  
—Ephesians 4:3

Many countries in West Africa have been dealing with armed conflict in recent years. Even so, peace is deeply rooted in our traditions. In the past, each community had an official conciliator, the blacksmith. He was believed to be a mediator between the world of the living and the spirit world—and also between people themselves. If the blacksmith intervened in a conflict, the hostilities would stop.

Paul urges us as followers of Christ to “keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” As Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” When we strive to live together in peace, the Spirit brings unity, but each of us can promote unity or destroy it. The unity of the church and of society must be preserved by the bond of peace. In Christ we have found peace with God; he came to

save us even though we were his enemies (Romans 5:8-11). Jesus is the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6), and he invites us to make peace in his name.

The people around us will not always be nice, fair, or do what is right. But even then, our role is to bring peace. We do this in our families, our churches, and wherever we spend our work-days. In this way we can help to make our world a place that reflects more of the values of God’s kingdom.

In what ways can you make peace in complicated relationships?

Prince of Peace, thank you for bringing us peace with God. Help us to bring peace to the people around us. Amen.

## ONE BODY, ONE SPIRIT, ONE HOPE

*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called. . . .*  
—Ephesians 4:4

On August 4, 1983, Thomas Sankara, a young military captain, and his supporters took power in the country of Upper Volta and renamed it Burkina Faso. Four years later he was assassinated. He left no property or money. His legacy was the example of one who loved his country, served it with self-sacrifice, and treated women, children, and farmers with dignity. Today he is still an example for millions of young people in Africa: a leader who wanted to serve his brothers and sisters. He loved his country with all his heart. He also fought for African unity.

In some ways this young leader's example reminds me of the only man who lived to serve, Jesus Christ. Our Lord prayed that his church would be united, that all who believe in him would be one. In that way the church can be a uni-

fied body. Even though it has many members, it is one because all have the same Spirit and the same hope.

The unity of the church is the foundation for serving one another. Just as all the parts of a physical body work together for the good of the whole body, so the members of the church serve each other. We don't reject or compete with each other; we complement one another.

What obstacles might your congregation be facing in terms of unity? How can you and your family promote the unity of the body of Christ?

Lord of the church, we thank you for giving your life so that we can have life. Help us to promote unity in the church today, serving you and one another. Amen.

## ONE FAITH IN ONE LORD

*There is . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

—Ephesians 4:4-6

Citizens of the same country have many things in common. For example, they share the same territory, language, and history. In a similar way Christians are one in Christ. We are united spiritually with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In terms of doctrine, we are united by the same confession: the same faith, the same hope, the same baptism. And in day-to-day life we as Christians are called to demonstrate this unity.

Rather than focusing on differences, which are only of minor importance, Paul lays the foundation for our unity. We have all been baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We profess the truths that Jesus lived among us, died on the cross, and rose from the dead. Our lives are led by the same Lord. As Christians, we share the same hope of living

in the fullness of joy in Christ forever. As Christians, we are filled with the same Spirit, through whom we cry, “Abba, Father” (Romans 8:15-16). Let us therefore make this unity visible. When we are focused on the things that bind us together, we can live in unity and maintain the bond of peace.

Where might there be differences in your family, church, and community? How can you emphasize what you have in common rather than what your differences are? What can you do to foster Christian unity despite the differences?

Father God, you call us to one common faith. Help us, your church, to strive for unity and to live for you. Amen.

## WE ALL HAVE GIFTS

*To each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.*  
—Ephesians 4:7

A story is told in Africa about a proud politician. This senior official had his own driver but did not treat him well. On a business trip he stopped at a restaurant and enjoyed a full meal, but he left his driver outside. On the way to a meeting afterward, the hungry driver decided to teach his boss a lesson. He turned off the car's engine and pretended the battery was dead. "I guess we'll have to push the car," the driver said. After they pushed the car a short distance, the driver said he would try to start the engine again, and it started. The sweaty politician learned that his driver was important too: he needed him in order to go places and to get there on time.

This story includes some important reminders for the church. No member is more important than the others, and

each one has gifts from God that can bless others. In the church, there are often people who think they have not received any special gifts from God. They think they have little or nothing to contribute. But that is a mistake. Another mistake is for people to think they don't need others or the gifts they can share. But God has given us many gifts and abilities, and we depend on each other in many ways.

What have you received from the Lord that you can share with others? And with what gifts from God have others blessed you?

Father, all that we have is a gift from you. Help us not to be proud of what we have or too proud to receive from others. Give us humble and gracious hearts. Amen.

## POWER FROM CHRIST THROUGH THE SPIRIT

*He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.*

—Ephesians 4:10

An African proverb says, “If a blind man says he will throw a stone at you, he probably has his foot on one.” In other words, don’t underestimate the danger of a threat. When someone says something like that, you should be aware of the possibility of harm.

Something similar is happening in this world. The gospel of Jesus Christ may seem powerless, like a blind man. But make no mistake: the reality is different! By his death on the cross, Christ has put Satan to shame and has stripped away the power that sin had over us. Christ, having received all authority (Matthew 28:18), has poured it out on his disciples. As followers of Jesus, we have received power from the Holy Spirit, through whom we reign with him. We are united with Christ in his victory, so we too are powerful.

Christ has overcome, and we are therefore overcomers—but not by ourselves, for this is a gift. Christ’s victory makes us rulers with him. It is important to recognize that we have this position in life. The Spirit in the church is proof of Christ’s victory.

How are you demonstrating the power of the Holy Spirit in your life today? How is God calling you into servant leadership with the gifts he has given? Receive the Holy Spirit, and ask God for help in using the gifts he has given you.

Dear Jesus, thank you for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Thank you for the great gifts the Spirit has given us. Help us to demonstrate your power and love to the people around us. In your name, Amen.

## SERVING WITH HUMILITY, LIKE CHRIST

*Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service. . . .*  
—Ephesians 4:11-12

Theologians sometimes speak about a difference between the church on earth and the church in heaven. Christ has triumphed over his enemies and is seated victoriously in heaven, and the church is there with him. Yet the church on earth must still face struggles and spiritual battles. We still have to learn, to train during the struggle, and to strive to reach the calling we have from Christ. How does the Lord Jesus help us in this?

In Ephesians 4, the apostle Paul helps us to see that Jesus gives us people with particular callings, particular ministries. He has given us the apostles and prophets as a foundation for the church. We have their words with us in the Bible. In addition, he gives us people who proclaim the gospel: evangelists, pastors, and teach-

ers. All of these callings equip and build up believers.

So if church pastors or other leaders focus on reputation, influence, or income, they lose sight of what they are called to do. They should be characterized by selflessness and willingness to serve. Being humble and gentle, as Paul noted at the beginning of Ephesians 4, is especially true for pastors, who are given authority to lead in the church.

What particular service are you called to in the church? How do you keep your motivations in check so that you can serve the body of Christ as you are called to do?

Lord, thank you for the many gifts and callings you have given us in the church. Help us to serve you faithfully. Amen.

## MATURITY IN FAITH AND LOVE

*We will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching. . . .*

—Ephesians 4:14

Many societies in the world today tend to neglect elderly people. They often focus on youth, innovation, and the desire to get ahead. Being young is fashionable, and people who can't keep up are often pushed aside.

An old African proverb puts it differently: "What an old man can see sitting down, the youth cannot see standing up." In other words, young people are full of youth and energy, but they don't have the wisdom that is acquired through experience.

Even in the early days of the church there were winds that could blow new believers off course. Ideas, ideals, and ideologies could sway new Christians one way and then another. In order to withstand the storm of doctrines and sort out what is wise from what is foolish, it is important to be-

come mature. An immature Christian may be joyful and full of energy but can also be unstable and undiscerning. Mature Christians confess the truth in love while continuing to grow. They know that love and truth, doctrine and life, grace and holiness go hand in hand and should not be separated. It is wonderful to be able to grow in this way. All of us continue to grow in faith, no matter how long we have followed Jesus.

In what ways can you keep growing in spiritual maturity? How is God calling you to support and encourage the next generation of believers?

Lord, help us to speak and live by the truth in love, helping others to grow in faith. Amen.

## CHRIST IS THE HEAD OF THE CHURCH

*From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*  
—Ephesians 4:16

Our body is controlled by our head (not the other way around). Our head is the coordinating center of our body.

It's the same way with the church, which is called the body of Christ. We draw our strength from Christ, our head. "Remain in me," he says; "apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

Christ guarantees the survival of his body. Jesus assures us, "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:18). Jesus is the one who makes each member grow, holds the whole body together, and nourishes all the parts to build each other up.

No matter how useful we are, how well we do, or how much we accomplish, we are called to be servants in the body. It is Christ who bears the fruit

in us. We don't seek glory for ourselves; to him alone is the glory.

Daily dependence on Christ is vitally important. We will never be competent enough to cope without living daily in communion with him. When the church forgets this principle, it becomes a lifeless body, a religion without a soul.

Consider some of the many ways in which you depend on God. What are some ways that God is using you in the church? How can you serve him more faithfully?

Dear Jesus, thank you for calling us into a living relationship with you. Help us to remember that we fully rely on you in order to bear fruit. In your name, Amen.

## LIVE A DIFFERENT LIFE IN CHRIST

*I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking.*

—Ephesians 4:17

In some translations of the Bible, this passage tells us not to live “as the *pagans* do.” That term “pagans” might make you think of primitive tribes, with idols and all sorts of superstitions and outdated religious rites. But Paul thinks differently. In this passage, “pagans,” or “Gentiles,” are people who get stuck in idle thoughts and unrestrained behaviors associated with greed. The idols of these people are mainly in their own hearts.

This problem is subtle; it hides behind all sorts of modern-day expectations and appearances. The behaviors associated with greed are complacency, the need to be in the limelight, material comforts, popularity, fashion, freedom, and more. And all of these are idols.

When Israel entered the land of Canaan, God warned them

not to imitate the neighboring peoples in their pagan behaviors (Deuteronomy 8:17-20). And Jesus prayed for his disciples, knowing they were still in the world but “not of the world” (John 17:16). In Ephesians, Paul reminds us again that the Lord calls us to follow him and to leave our old, pagan ways behind.

What types of idols call out to your heart today? How can the community around you—your school, church, or family—help you to live a different life for Jesus?

Dear Lord, thank you for calling us into new life with you. Please protect us from the idols of our hearts. Help us to be your faithful followers. Amen.

## CALLED INTO NEW LIFE

*Put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*  
—Ephesians 4:24

At the invitation of a French church, one of my colleagues was able to travel to Europe. This was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for him, but the very long flight was rather difficult for him. He was thirsty and hungry, and yet he refused any food or drink from the flight attendants. The reason? He thought he would have to pay a lot of money for the food, and he had no extra money with him. He didn't realize the food was already included in the price of the flight.

Many Christians are like my colleague. They do not realize that the price has already been paid.

As Christians, we are—so to speak—in a new system. We are no longer prisoners of our old lives. Every child of God has a new life in Jesus Christ. We have entered a new reality. In Christ, your old life has

been put to death, and you are called into new life. You have received a new nature, conformed to Christ and pleasing to God.

This is good news for us all. Instead of feeling weak and powerless against our sinful nature, we can live into the new reality that Christ has paid for everything we need in order to be saved to new life. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we can live grateful lives that are filled with God's righteousness and holiness.

Heavenly Father, sometimes I fail to remember how great your grace is in my life. Forgive me for those times, and give me the grace to embrace my new identity as your child. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## SPEAK TRUTHFULLY

*Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor. . . .*  
—Ephesians 4:25

Our readings for today instruct us to be honest with the people in our lives. Jesus speaks about this in terms of keeping oaths, and Paul urges us to speak truthfully. These teachings remind me of two situations in my context.

In Burkina Faso, it is not easy to say “no” to others because that is seen as showing disrespect. So a “yes” can mean yes or no; only the person answering knows what the “yes” means. So we say “yes” even if it is actually no. But instead we must learn to say “no” with love. We must also learn to accept it when another person says “no.” Otherwise, relationships become unreal and hypocritical because we are not able to provide clear answers to each other.

Similarly, we have what we call “African time.” This means that people can arrive between fif-

teen minutes to an hour after the agreed time without any problem. This may seem like a blessing and relief to someone who is hurried and stressed, but it frustrates and disadvantages people who are punctual.

If we hide the truth from others, that is lying. In other situations, we might also be ashamed of our actions, so we might try to cover them up with lies. But telling the truth means giving correct information, keeping our word, fulfilling obligations, and being punctual. It means not making promises we cannot keep.

How can you “speak truthfully” to the people in your culture and life today?

Lord, we want to be people of truth. Help us to be honest with you, ourselves, and others. Amen.

## WE ARE CALLED TO TRUTH

*Speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.*  
—Ephesians 4:25

Social media has changed our world. Even in Burkina Faso, a fairly isolated country, the internet has made it much easier for people to connect with the rest of the world. This was a tremendous benefit during the COVID-19 crisis.

But there is another side to the use of the internet. Social media has had negative effects on society and even on faith. Sharing information and rumors—often from questionable sources—has become easy and very tempting. Many people in Africa, including Christians, are doing this. We especially like to share news about scandals, dramas, and conspiracies. We might think that these kinds of things are so common that they are harmless. But sharing false information is the same as lying.

I find it fascinating that Paul gives the following reason to speak truthfully: we are all

members of one body. Each body part affects the whole body. So if believers in Christ spread misinformation, we reduce the truthfulness of the church. Christians are then seen as untrustworthy, and this dishonors Christ and ultimately harms our ability to be taken seriously when we share the good news of Jesus.

Christians are called to live by the truth. That doesn't mean you have to stay away from social media. It means you must follow Jesus, who says, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6). Let's look for ways to make that resonate in the social media world.

Holy Spirit, let us be people marked by the truth. And may the truth reach many people with the gospel. Amen.

## PRACTICING SELF-CONTROL

*"In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.*

—Ephesians 4:26-27

The Mossi make up the largest people group in Burkina Faso, where I live. They have a strict concept of self-control. They say that a leader—or any real man—should never laugh but always be serious. This notion is passed on through the generations. Fathers do not congratulate their children. If a father is proud of his child, he must hide it so that the child does not relax and take life too easily. It is believed that being strict with children trains them to be strong.

Fortunately the Bible is more realistic and balanced about self-control. It even teaches that it's okay to be angry—but if you don't control your anger, you will end up sinning. The consequences of uncontrolled anger are many and damaging. Anger is not good for our self-esteem, and it grieves the Holy Spirit within us. In addition,

there are often victims. Most violence begins with uncontrolled anger.

In this broken world, relationships are precious and vulnerable. But anger can enter in and give the devil a foothold.

How have you learned to control your anger? The healing power of forgiveness is an amazing antidote. Forgiveness restores relationships and gives them a new chance. How is God calling you to help people who struggle with anger or are victims of it?

Father, you have shown us mercy and grace instead of being angry with us. Help us not to sin in our anger; instead, let us be people of your peace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## PEOPLE MARKED BY GENEROSITY

*Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.*

—Ephesians 4:28

Everyone knows what stealing is, and in all cultures stealing is considered shameful and unacceptable. In my local context, a thief who is caught may be beaten by an angry mob. Things may be different in other countries of the world, but the verdict on a thief is often harsh and negative.

The Bible teaches that stealing is not limited to deliberately taking something from another person. In the Old Testament the Lord makes clear that stealing is not only about taking money or things but also about depriving people of money or help when they are entitled to it. Stealing can take many forms: withholding a worker's wages, not paying tithes and offerings, or depriving the poor, widowed, or orphaned of the help they need.

Stealing happens actively and passively. Active theft is shame-

ful, and few people do it. But who can claim to be innocent of passive theft? We like to think of help to the poor, to prisoners, to the sick, to strangers—and more—as charity, not as an obligation or as a call to justice. But Paul reminds us that the wealth we earn isn't just for our families; we are called to share generously with people in need.

Who are some of the most generous people in your life? What traits and values characterize them? How can we share with others in new and creative ways?

Lord Jesus, thank you for your generous gift of eternal life. Guide us to be people marked by generosity, pointing others to you. Amen.

## SPEAK TO BUILD OTHERS UP

*Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. —Ephesians 4:29*

A study showed that in order to cancel the devastating effects of one negative word, four positive words need to be spoken. This shows how negative, harsh, and humiliating words can do great damage to human beings.

Our passage for today uses vivid imagery to speak about the impact our words can have. Just as a small rudder can steer a ship or a bit can control a horse, so the words of our mouths can make a big difference in life. Further, our speech can have the same effect as a spark: it can cause great destruction! We are encouraged, then, to choose our words carefully and to recognize the impact our speech makes.

In Ephesians 4, Paul provides similar teaching about positive language; we are called to build others up and speak in a

way that helps the people who hear our words.

Children are often the first victims of negative language. I grew up in a family in which my mother was often beaten harshly by her husband, my adoptive father. The demeaning words he used against her continue to haunt me, and they come back in my dreams. Thankfully, the love of Jesus has healed much of this trauma, and by grace I am able to show love to my family.

As we reflect on the power of words, let's consider how—with the Spirit's help—we can bring healing for people who have faced trauma.

Lord, help us to be people marked by kind, uplifting, gracious, and healing words. Amen.

## RIDDING OUR HEARTS OF BITTERNESS

*Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.* —Ephesians 4:31

The Bible urges us to guard our hearts, for our actions flow from what is in our hearts (Proverbs 4:23). In our reading today, Jesus teaches that whatever fills the heart overflows into our words and actions. He points out that if there is wickedness in our words, that is the result of what is rooted in our hearts.

It is so easy to harbor negative or destructive feelings in our hearts. Biblical history is full of stories of bitterness, envy, and anger that caused serious problems in families and among God's people. Cain, Adam's first son, was bitter about how Abel's offering was received with God's favor. Rather than dealing with his anger, he let bitterness and envious anger rule his heart. Because he could not quench this fire in his heart, the fruit followed: he committed the first murder (Genesis 4). In another

story, Joseph's brothers were so blinded by their jealousy of Joseph that they sold him into slavery (Genesis 37). These are just two examples about anger causing serious problems in people's lives.

In the history of the church, we see divisions without justifiable causes; conflicts and individual interests have often been the root of these problems. As adopted children of God, we are already seated with Christ in heavenly places, but we must daily examine our attitudes and motives to see if our desires match with who we are in Christ.

Dear God, please prevent us from harboring bitterness and anger in our hearts. Give us grace to make peace with the people around us. Amen.

## FORGIVE AS YOU HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN

*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.* —Ephesians 4:32

Nelson Mandela courageously fought against apartheid in South Africa. His actions led to wrongful convictions and time in prison because of political enemies. As he was leaving prison, he was quoted as saying, “As I stand at the door of my freedom, I realize that if I don’t leave my pain, anger, and bitterness behind, I will always be in prison.”

Self-imprisonment is worse than the imprisonment that is imposed on you. Many people suffer from self-imposed prisons by refusing to forgive. But the inner walls of anger and resentment do not make us strong; instead, they make us bitter and miserable.

When Nelson Mandela later came to power as the president of his country, he did not establish the law of the victor. Rather than seeking revenge against his political enemies, he showed

forgiveness to all. The film *Invictus*, inspired by his actions, shows the power of forgiveness.

Jesus teaches us to love our enemies, and he even died for his enemies—that is, all of us. Christ’s compassion for us is incomprehensible; he showed it by forgiving us all and dying for us. This love also moves us to forgive others for their faults against us. The Lord can help us to forgive everything.

Are you aware of your daily need for God’s forgiveness? Why do you think it’s difficult to forgive others? To whom is God calling you to offer forgiveness today?

Father, thank you for the forgiveness you offer us in Christ Jesus. Help us to be gracious, forgiving, and compassionate for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

## LOVE: GOD'S EXPENSIVE FREE GIFT

*Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

—Ephesians 5:1-2

John teaches that “God is love.” One of the clearest ways God has shown his love to us has been through sending Jesus to us. And it’s important to note *when* God did this: “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

God wants us to reflect the love he has shown to us as we interact with the people around us. As John puts it, “Since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” Likewise, Paul calls us to “follow God’s example” by showing love to all people.

In some ways, love is what makes Christianity special. Other religions seem to focus more on obedience or a system of rewards for certain actions. And human reason cannot

make sense of the focus on love. Loving actions that reflect the love of God can be so contrary to corrupt human reason. Our hearts are used to a quid pro quo—I’ll do this because you did that. Following that system, love is merely earned and not a gift.

But if God’s love had to be earned, none of us could ever be loved. Christian love is free; it is expensive for the one who offers it, but not for the one who receives it.

Whom is God calling you to love today?

Father, thank you for showing your love to us in Christ Jesus—while we were sinners! This is good news for our weary hearts. Give us the grace to show love to everyone around us. Amen.

## WE ARE HOLY IN CHRIST

*Among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people.*  
—Ephesians 5:3

One major difficulty for many believers is to try to live up to the Bible's high standard for purity. The morals of the societies we live in—along with the internet and other media—do not make it easy to live God's way. In Africa, many of my fellow believers are first-generation Christians in our families. We are often the children of our father's second or third wife. My own father, for example, married nearly ten wives, and my mother was his second wife. As you can see, the way sexuality was treated in my family is extremely different from what I read in the Bible.

Yet Paul says that Christians must not have even a hint of sexual immorality, other impurity, or greed. Here Paul is addressing the desires of our hearts. What drives you? What is most important to you? What is your greatest desire?

Does it match with what God's Word calls you to be?

Our view of sexuality, and of desires in general, must be constantly renewed in a personal relationship with the Lord and his Word. This is true for all Christians, no matter where we live. The apostle reminds us that we are holy through our union with Christ. And, as a result, we are called to new life that is marked with a deep desire for God's kingdom.

Dear Father, thank you for making us holy through your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us to live for you in the choices we make, following the instructions in your Word. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## LIGHTS CALLED TO SHINE

*Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord.*  
—Ephesians 5:8-10

Every year at Christmastime we celebrate the birth of the Savior with many lights. These lights illuminate our streets, trees, and houses. In some places people light special decorations as well.

Why do we celebrate Christmas with so many lights? Because the baby Jesus was himself the light. When he came to earth, he became a light for people who were walking in darkness. And we are part of that group of people. Just as the great light of the sun literally illuminates us, Christ—the Son of God—figuratively illuminates the world so that the darkness is dispelled.

In him we also become light, called to shine. The fruits of light are all kinds of goodness, justice, and truth. And the absence of these things is what makes our world so sad and

dark in many places. In order to shine the light ourselves—and not just at Christmastime!—all we have to do is walk in the light of Christ, following him. He then shines through us.

As you think about shining in the world around you, consider this question: How much light is needed in your school or workplace? How do you, as a follower of Christ, provide good influence to the people around you because you walk in the light?

Light of life, thank you for coming into the darkness of our world. By your Spirit, help me to walk in the light so that others may see you in me. In your name, Amen.

## MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR TIME

*Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.*

—Ephesians 5:15-16

The apostle Paul urges Christians to live a life of wisdom and self-control. All Christians are called to be holy people in a fallen world, and times are often hard.

A Christian must be recognized by wise living. Life is short, and God calls us to live for him. He is the Lord, our Creator, and we are his. God calls us to make the most of our time—that is, to make the best use of it. Time is one of the precious gifts God has entrusted to us, so it is our responsibility to manage it well.

In some evangelical churches in Africa, and perhaps also in Europe, Christians are encouraged to wait passively for the things of heaven. They think their responsibility is limited to praying, praying, and praying more. With that type of attitude, their responsibility is

not sufficiently called upon. But with God's help, we can make the most of our time, in a good way, by thinking carefully about how we want to use our hours, whether it's in our work, in needed rest or relaxation, or in giving time to others. All of these things contribute to the coming of the kingdom of God.

What would be the consequences of misusing our time? Why is a good use of time an important aspect of our faith? How can we help young people in this regard?

Father in heaven, everything we have is a gift from you, including our time. Help us to make the most of every opportunity and to honor you in the process. Amen.

## BE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT

*Do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. . . .*  
—Ephesians 5:17-18

People who do not know Christ have no heavenly hope. Without hope, it can be tempting to live in unhealthy ways that cause harm and can even be deadly. The Bible warns against drunkenness, for example. Drinking heavily can be a temptation for believers as well as nonbelievers.

But God calls believers to wise living in the Spirit. When our hope is in Christ, we look forward to a heavenly feast, and the Holy Spirit confirms this hope. Through the Spirit we can already taste in our present lives the fruits of joy, peace, and love.

When we allow ourselves to be filled by the Spirit on a daily basis, we can grow in the Spirit's fruitbearing and guard against despair or boredom, which can lead to all sorts of excesses. People who drink

too much wine or other alcohol detach themselves in a totally wrong way. But by the Spirit of God we can detach ourselves from ourselves in a way that is perfectly good. As Paul writes, we are to "be filled with the Spirit."

Every believer is called to desire that filling daily. This is a privilege that we can and should seize. Otherwise the danger is that we will exhaust ourselves by trying to live as good Christians on our own. Real Christian living is impossible without the influence of the Spirit.

Spirit of God, thank you for entering our lives as the promised counselor. Guide us so that we may bear the fruit of a life filled with you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## SINGING OUR GRATITUDE TO GOD

*Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord. . . .*  
—Ephesians 5:18-19

When we are filled with the Holy Spirit, we begin to notice the fruit of the Spirit in ourselves. One of the Spirit's fruits is joy—a deep sense of contentment and gratitude in all things, even when life's circumstances are difficult. The early church had a rich practice of rejoicing through song: Paul indicates that they sang psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to the Lord with all their hearts.

What kinds of songs do you sing in your congregation? Psalms? Hymns? Songs from the Spirit? Why do you do this? And how does it affect your faith and life?

In singing, we express our gratitude to God for his great deeds, and we receive God's grace and edification in return. We bring God an offering of praise, but at the same time we hear him speaking to us and

encouraging us. One could even say that singing praises to God can function similarly to prayer. Like prayer, singing can both support our individual faith formation as well as our corporate worship and fellowship with one another. When we sing together about the goodness and grace of our triune God, we grow in connection as a body of believers.

How does singing help you to express your gratitude to God? What psalm, hymn, or spiritual song has been particularly formative in your faith?

Holy Spirit, fill me with joy, that I may sing songs of praise today. Let everything that has breath join me in praising the Lord! Amen.

## OUT OF REVERENCE FOR CHRIST

*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.*

—Ephesians 5:21-22

Paul starts this section with a command: submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. And this connects with family life, which is not yet perfect—for although, as Christians, we already belong to the kingdom of God, we still live in a broken world.

The family is the ideal place to learn about life. Through family relationships we can learn love, respect, obedience, and gratitude. So the Bible places great importance on the husband-wife relationship. Echoing his opening command, Paul states that women are to submit to their husbands. The motivation here is not submission based on fear, but submission that flows from one's submission to the Lord. Children who grow up with parents who submit to one another out of reverence for Christ will be more likely to approach their relationships

with this Christlike posture. And this posture has the power to make a real impact on the children's lives and on society in general.

It cannot be overstated, however, that Paul is not calling wives to blind, forced submission. He is instead calling women to freely submit out of reverence to the Lord. What does this kind of submission to one another look like? How is Christ's model a guide for us? In Christ we can choose to submit to one another in ways that encourage the flourishing of all family members as well as the church.

Spirit, guide us in how to live in submission to one another out of reverence for Christ. Amen.

## AS CHRIST LOVES THE CHURCH

*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. . . .*  
—Ephesians 5:25

In many parts of Africa women are dependent on their husbands in all respects. As you can imagine, this can lead to serious abuses of power by a husband. But, globally, society is changing. More and more women are becoming independent. They might have a paying job or be able to receive advanced training. However, even these advances for women can cause negative impacts. Some men who are afraid of losing their traditional role have become bitter and have resorted to violence against their wives.

It is not easy to live as a Christian in a changing society. But Paul's instructions here still apply today. Every woman is worthy of the love of God, and God calls husbands to love their wives just as Christ loves the church. A husband must love his wife selflessly. Christ is

not only our example in how to love others, but he is also our strength.

Unfortunately, all over the world there are husbands who mistreat their wives and are violent toward them. Sometimes they even do this with an appeal to the Bible. But violent behavior is contrary to God's Word. God calls all of us to humbly love and to lead as a servant, just as Jesus did. Any other way leads to authoritarian excesses.

Think about how you love and lead others in your life. Is it based in God's Word? Let us look to the Lord Jesus as an unmoving example of how to treat one another.

Lord Jesus, thank you for your example. Fill us with the grace and humility to live and love as you have done. Amen.

## MUCH TO TEACH, MUCH TO LEARN

*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.*

—Ephesians 6:1

We are currently experiencing a crisis of authority in Africa. In my country, the younger generation criticizes the older generation because conditions are often so bad. Many young people are more aware of their rights, which is a good thing—but they are often less willing to fulfill their duties. And for this reason the future does not look good.

Such generational issues probably exist outside of Africa as well. And Paul's words here have much wisdom for young Christians everywhere.

For any of you in the younger generation, it is important to know that it is a great privilege to be a Christian. Paul is addressing you here, because you belong to the body of Christ. As young believers, you share in all the glorious promises of God. You are part of the church, and you have a special

place in it. You have much to teach the church, and also much to learn and grow in—as do we all.

Obedience to your parents is a good thing—even a blessing, says Paul. Respect for parents fosters learning and flourishing between the generations. In fact, we are all called to obey our parents, regardless of our age. If you are young, or not so young anymore, how might God be calling you to improve your relationships with your parents or older friends? How might the Holy Spirit work through all our relationships with parents and older believers?

Holy Spirit, help us to grow in unity as a body of believers, young and old, called to be your witness in the world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## LOVE OF THE BASS AND SOPRANO

*Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.* —Ephesians 6:4

A child is a gift from God. However, many parents are overwhelmed when they learn that parenthood comes with great responsibility. Parents must nurture and care for children physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Children grow up to be mature and independent people. And parents and caregivers are tasked with being their first guides in life.

An African proverb says that a child is raised by two voices: a bass voice and a soprano voice. This refers to a child's need for both limits and love. Giving your child freedom can be an act of love, but it can be cruel if you do not also give your child the security and structure they need. On the other hand, subjecting a child to endless rules without grace is also a costly mistake.

Raising children with loveless limits can make them bitter,

and Paul warns parents against that. What's more, that kind of parenting can cause children to have a distorted image of God, their heavenly Father.

Were you raised in a home with too many rules and lacking love and grace? Many of us know the bitterness that can cause, but the good news is that we can find healing in God, our perfect parent. As believers, we must not forget the high voice and the low voice, the love and the limits of the Christian life. Parents can depend on the heavenly Father and lean into the support of the community of believers, talking with each other and with their children—all along the way as they grow.

Holy Spirit, guide us in raising young people in the grace and truth of our Lord Jesus. Amen.

**WITH SINCERITY OF HEART**

*Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ.*

—Ephesians 6:5

Many people around the world fall prey to the message of the prosperity gospel. It claims that all who believe in Jesus will experience social and economic prosperity. It's tempting to believe this message—that a good Christian will always be the head and never the tail, the leader and never the follower, the rich person and never the poor. But the apostle Paul dispels that view of prosperity. He bears witness to the reality of the early church. Despite being children of God, there were still many Christians who were called to serve their fellow believers or even unbelievers—and some of them in that day were slaves. Paul urges them, in every situation, to serve their leaders wholeheartedly, with devotion, as if they were serving the Lord himself.

Paul, it would seem, is telling us that prosperity or success

is not about having the most power or money or influence. Instead, we prosper through living a life of sincere Christian service. Working conscientiously for a boss or leader is a good thing when we do it for the right reason and in the right spirit. We should not work hard merely to reap the rewards of money and power; nor should we work hard at the expense of also serving our brothers and sisters.

How are you serving God in your work and daily tasks? How do you work differently because of your faith in Jesus?

Heavenly Father, turn my eyes to you so that I may learn to serve others humbly in all the areas of my life for Jesus' sake. Amen.

## EXERCISE AUTHORITY WITH HUMILITY

*You know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.* —Ephesians 6:8

I live on a continent that is familiar with colonialism. For centuries, many African countries were ruled by outside powers. We have experienced tyranny, exploitation, and slavery. Unfortunately, independence has not automatically made us better rulers. Too often, having power has led to dominating, intimidating, taking advantage of, and even abusing the weak.

Power is a tricky thing for us all. Since the fall into sin, we have had a problem with power. Once we have power, we are almost always tempted to abuse it to the detriment of others. This is not a new problem. The Psalms are filled with complaints over injustice and abuse of power, and the Bible bears witness to how fiercely God responds to such evil.

Instead, God calls us to a different way. If God gives us more

privilege, power, or resources, he calls us to use these things to care for others and to protect the weak. If you are a Christian and have power or privilege in your life, use it wisely. Maybe you have been placed in a high position or have simply been born in a country with ample resources. Whatever the case, think about how you can show gratitude to God by using your influence and resources wisely.

Everyone is created in God's image. By valuing everyone, we honor our Creator. We are called to exercise authority with humility and to steward our resources with a spirit of service.

Lord Jesus, help us to follow you, humbly using power and influence for the flourishing of others. Amen.

# FamilyFire

A Spirit-fueled marriage and family ministry and online community.



Discover encouraging articles, videos, ebooks, and supportive discussion groups to encourage your marriage, parenting, or extended family relationships.

**FamilyFire.com**



RETURN POSTAGE GUARANTEED  
PORT DE RETOUR GARANTI

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew



**ReFrame**  
Ministries

is the new name of  
Back to God Ministries International

3475 Mainway  
Burlington, ON L7M 1A9  
P.O. Box 5070, STN LCD 1  
Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8  
905-336-2920  
[info@todaydevotional.com](mailto:info@todaydevotional.com)  
[www.todaydevotional.com](http://www.todaydevotional.com)  
[facebook.com/todaydevotional](https://facebook.com/todaydevotional)

Periodicals postage paid at  
Grand Rapids, Mich., and at  
additional mailing offices.

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew

---



**ReFrame**  
Ministries

---

is the new name of  
Back to God Ministries International

1700 28th Street SE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407  
800-626-3060  
[info@todaydevotional.com](mailto:info@todaydevotional.com)  
[www.todaydevotional.com](http://www.todaydevotional.com)  
[facebook.com/todaydevotional](https://facebook.com/todaydevotional)

---