

Today

Nov/Dec 2020

refresh, refocus, renew



THE WORLD'S
True KING

ALSO: QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS

Dear friends:

When our children were young, they had a big wicker basket filled with dress-up clothes to play with. They loved putting on robes and making crowns from construction paper as they pretended to be kings and queens. Children aren't the only ones fascinated by royalty. As our media often show, royals and royalty catch the attention of adults as well.



The Bible includes the stories of many kings and queens—and not all of them are happy stories. In fact, for every good king, there seems to have been at least two or more bad kings in the history of God's people Israel.

Yet God in his wisdom used kings and queens to carry forward important parts of his plan of salvation. And the true King, Jesus Christ, is now seated on the throne of heaven and will one day receive the honor and glory due to his holy name. Pastor Darrin Compagner explores the theme of kingship in November to help us better understand and worship Jesus as the King of kings.

In December, Pastor Art Schoonveld reflects on many questions about God the Father, Jesus, the Bible, prayer, and the church—with a special focus on Christmas and its meaning for our daily lives. He urges us to reflect thoughtfully on the Savior, Jesus Christ, and to draw closer to him during this Advent and Christmas season.

May God's Word refresh, refocus, and renew you each day!

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

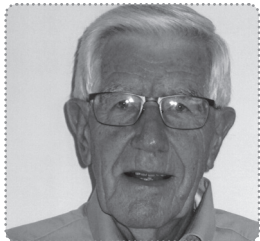
Today

Nov/Dec 2020

refresh, refocus, renew



**“The World’s True King”
Darrin Compagner**



**“Questions, Questions”
Art Schoonveld**

Managing Editor: Jeff Bulthuis
Executive Editor: Kurt Selles

TODAY (USPS 185-140),
Volume 70, Number 6,
published bimonthly by
ReFrame Media, a division
of 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 © 2020, Back to
God Ministries International.
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.

Cover photo: Unsplash



ReFrame
Media

december

QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS

Art Schoonveld

This month, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior, the Lord Jesus, let's look at some questions that are often asked about God the Father, Jesus, the Bible, prayer, the church, and more. We'll listen carefully to what the Bible says to answer these questions. If, like many other people, you have been searching for answers, we pray that these devotions will help with some of your questions, help you reflect thoughtfully, and draw you closer to the Savior, who is Christ the Lord!

Art Schoonveld is a retired pastor in the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Before retiring in 2001, he served churches in California, Illinois, and Michigan. Since that time he has worked for the denomination part-time and has served as an interim pastor. Art and his wife, Anita, have four married children and 11 grandchildren.

NO PLACE FOR GOD?

Lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" —Isaiah 40:9

Some time ago a chaplain at a public university heard one of the administrators saying, "No offense, but I think anyone who believes in God has a mental health problem. God has no place in a scientific institution such as a university."

That administrator is not alone. An article in a church magazine reported that a group of students who were studying theology at a German university were convinced that "neither God nor the church were of much relevance today." Even though they were baptized members of Lutheran and Reformed churches, they felt that God had become irrelevant.

Some of the people I know have come to the same conclusion: If there is a God, he is far away and no longer matters.

About 2,700 years ago God's people in Jerusalem and Judah

felt the same way. Many of their people had been taken into exile, and it seemed that the Lord had abandoned them. But God told his prophet Isaiah to remind them that he was with them every step of the way. Regardless of what anyone might think, God is here, and he is at work in our world still today.

Some 700 years after Isaiah spoke, God proved his presence through the birth of his Son, the Lord Jesus. He "moved into the neighborhood" (John 1:14, *The Message*). Don't think for a moment that God has become irrelevant. Our God is here!

Father in heaven, thank you for showing your presence through the coming of our Lord Jesus. Open our hearts to receive him as our Savior. Amen.

NO NEED FOR GOD?

“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth. . . . He himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.”
—Acts 17:24-25

In a conversation I had with a young man recently about God, religion, and the church, I was told that he, like many other millennials, did not really feel a need for God. He was well educated and had a good-paying job, so he figured, “Why bother with God?” More than 30 percent of the people in North America think the same way and claim to have no religion whatsoever. Their lives are full, and they believe there simply is no need for God, religion, or the church.

No need for God? According to the Bible, every human being needs God—from the moment we are born until we die. We are dependent on God for every single breath we take and for every step we take. That’s what the apostle Paul said to his audience in the city of Athens, “God . . . gives everyone life and breath and

everything else.” There was no need for the many gods the Athenians had invented. The God of heaven and earth takes care of *all* of life for *all* of us.

Whatever we may think, you and I need this God more than we will ever know—for this life and for the life to come. Ask God today to open your eyes, and receive him as your Lord and Savior.

Lord, help us to see how much we need you every day. Open our eyes and our hearts to make room for the Savior, who came to free us from sin and death. Amen.

WHAT IF YOU CAN'T FIND GOD?

"You will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."
—Jeremiah 29:12-13

Several years ago, a high school senior sent me a note after I had given a chapel talk at her school. She wrote, "What do you do when you can't find God? You pray, and it feels like you are talking to an empty chair; and you read your Bible, but it's just words, and it does not mean anything to you." C.S. Lewis wrote that when he prayed during his wife's illness, the doors to heaven seemed to have been double-bolted.

Some of us have had that experience of feeling that God is far away and unreachable. Even some of the psalmists wrote about times when God did not seem to be anywhere near. In Psalm 22, David cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus himself repeated those words as he hung dying on the cross (Mark 15:34).

So what do you do when you can't find God? Do what the psalmist did, and cry out to God. Let him know how much you need him. And read and reread today's Bible passage, which assures us that when we seek God with all our hearts, we will find him. God wants to be a part of our everyday lives, just as he showed us when his Son, our Savior was born.

Lord, sometimes you seem so far away, and sometimes we simply can't find you. Help us to seek you, and please show yourself to us. We ask this in the name of our Savior, the Lord Jesus. Amen.

WHERE IS GOD WHEN IT HURTS?

If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you . . . for darkness is as light to you."
—Psalm 139:11-12

Several years ago someone in our community took her own life. Her family was devastated and had a lot of questions. Was God with her in the last moments of her life? Was she right with God when she died? She had been a Christian all her life. Was God's hand still on her, as David puts it in Psalm 139:5?

People often ask, Where is God during the darkest moments of our lives? Where is God when someone who loves the Lord reaches a point where it seems impossible to go on living? David gives an answer to that question. God is where we are, even in our darkest moments. If we have ever reached a point where we can't find a trace of God, he is still there. And when we grope around in total darkness, even that darkness is not dark to God. God never leaves us even

in our deepest hurts or in the darkest moments of our lives.

A Dutch minister tells about a Christmas "celebration" in a Japanese concentration camp during World War II. Standing behind the barracks and shivering in the cold, the group of prisoners he was with felt the presence of the Lord more than at any time before.

The Lord Jesus came into our darkness to assure us that he will never leave us or forsake us. And sometimes we can see God more clearly when we hurt the most.

Lord Jesus, thank you for coming into our darkness and for being with us even in our darkest moments. Amen.

DID GOD LOSE CONTROL?

Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God. . . . He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.
—Isaiah 40:28

In the play *Requiem for a Nun*, the author, William Faulkner, says through one of the characters that after God created everything, he lost control. Things simply got out of hand, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Did God lose control? Sometimes we might wonder. We listen to the news and watch what's happening around us, and we may wonder, "Is anyone in charge?" We read about violence and poverty, about wars without end, about natural disasters and personal tragedies, and we might ask, "Did Faulkner have it right when he said that God lost control?"

Let's see what the Bible says in our reading for today. The prophet asks, "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God. . . ." God directs all the

action in the universe—from the stars and planets in space to the rise and fall of rulers and nations in this world. We may not understand how, but God is firmly in control.

Our daily news doesn't tell the whole story. Our God reigns; he is in charge. And until he comes again, there will be wars and rumors of wars and poverty and persecution. But until then, the Savior, whose birth we celebrate this month, also says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. . . . And . . . I am with you always" (Matthew 28:18-20).

Lord, help us always to remember that you are in charge. And give us eyes of faith to see the ways you are at work in our world each day. In Jesus, Amen.

IS JESUS THE ANSWER?

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. . . . I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”
—Matthew 11:28-29

A song we sang at a worship service had these words: “The world is searching for answers. Whom can we turn to?” And it answered: “There is someone—he is the answer. His name is Jesus. A ray of hope in a hopeless world.”

But if Jesus is the answer, why do we still have so many unanswered questions? Why so many problems, and why so much suffering?

God himself gave the answer to many of our questions on the day Jesus was born more than 2,000 years ago. His answer came in the form of a baby, his one and only Son, who came to save the world and all who believe in him (John 3:16-17).

In today’s Bible passage the Lord Jesus explains why he is the answer. He offers to give us rest for our souls by making

us God’s children. He is, in the words of that song, “A ray of hope in a hopeless world.”

All we need to do is accept his invitation to come to him—and when we do, we will find rest for our souls. Then will we know that he truly is the answer.

Thank you, Lord, for coming into our world and into our lives. Thank you for the invitation to come to you so that we can find rest for our souls. Give us the grace to accept your invitation so that we may know you truly are the answer. We ask all this in your name. Amen.

WHY NOT TODAY?

The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases.
—Mark 1:33-34

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.
—Hebrews 13:8

In a conversation about Jesus' miracles, someone asked, "If Jesus 'healed many who had various diseases,' and if 'Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever,' why should we not expect him to heal also today?"

And doesn't Psalm 103:3 say that the Lord forgives all our sins and heals all our diseases?

Some people have said that perhaps Jesus doesn't always heal because people do not have enough faith. But that idea has upset many faith-filled Christians who have prayed and prayed for physical healing for someone they loved—and yet there was no healing.

Or could it be, as some others have said, that the time for miraculous healings has passed?

Well, neither of those ideas makes sense. Miraculous heal-

ings still happen today, and some people have seen healings before their very eyes. We don't know why some people are healed and some are not, but it does not have to do with a lack of faith.

During his ministry on earth, Jesus did not heal everyone. And he did not promise physical healing for all who asked. (See also 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.) But Jesus *does* promise to give us strength to bear whatever burdens we may carry (Matthew 11:28).

Lord, help us to know that you always love and provide for us, whether healing comes now or in the life to come. Amen.

DOES JESUS KNOW?

We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses. . . .
—Hebrews 4:15

Shortly after her husband died, my sister said, “I feel so terribly empty. I try to explain it, but no one knows just how I feel.” She had it right. Unless we have lost a spouse, a child, or another person close to us, we cannot really know what it is to lose someone we love. That explains why, in the Old Testament, Job complained that his long-winded friends were “miserable comforters” (Job 16:2).

But according to today’s Bible passage in Hebrews, there is Someone who does understand: the Lord Jesus. He came to earth to live our lives from beginning to end. Born as a human being who dealt with all kinds of struggles and challenges just as we do in life, he identified with us—and much more, because he also gave his life so that we can have new life and be reconciled with God. As

Hebrews assures us, we have a high priest who can feel what we feel. As *The Message* puts it, “We don’t have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He’s been through weakness and testing, experienced it all—all but the sin.”

When no one else understands or knows how we feel, the Lord Jesus knows. If you feel alone and misunderstood, come and talk to him. He knows how you feel and what you have gone through. Come to him boldly, with confidence, and tell him exactly how you feel. And when you do, you will “receive mercy and find grace” in your time of need.

Lord Jesus, thank you for understanding how we feel. Comfort all who grieve and feel empty because of what has happened to them. Amen.

ANGRY WITH GOD?

I say to God my Rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning . . . ?"
—Psalm 42:9

A woman in our church community was struggling. Her father had died. And then, just two days after the funeral, her mother had a stroke and was taken to the hospital. With tears in her eyes, the woman said to us, "I am sad, and I am angry. It's so unfair." She was angry with God because she felt he was unfair. It seemed to her that God didn't care.

So many things in life can make us frustrated and sometimes angry with God. At times it can seem that God doesn't care enough for his people who love and worship him. And then, oddly, it can also seem that God cares more for people who don't want anything to do with him. Sometimes they even mock believers and say, "Where is your God?"—and yet they might enjoy great wealth and prosperity.

Why is it that millions of people live in poverty, while others have more money than they can use? Why is there persecution for some and freedom for others?

There are no easy answers to these questions. Meanwhile, the psalmist reminds us to "put [our] hope in God." And through the prophet Isaiah God gently says that his thoughts are not our thoughts and his ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8). In this season, God also asks us to turn to the child born in Bethlehem to be assured that the Lord cares for us, no matter what.

Lord, our God, so many things happen that we do not understand. Help us to trust that your will and your way are always good. In Jesus' name, Amen.

DOES JESUS STILL CHANGE LIVES?

[Saul] fell to the ground and heard a voice. . . . "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.

—Acts 9:4-5

Saul was in for the surprise of his life. On his way to the city of Damascus to arrest people who were followers of Jesus, he was stopped in his tracks by a light from heaven. And he heard the voice of Jesus himself asking, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Then, after three days of being blind, the man who had been filled with hatred for believers in Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit.

The Lord Jesus changed his life.

The same Lord still changes lives today. I remember a teenager who had joined with a Christian youth group on a weekend retreat. And when she came home, she told her parents, "I have become a follower of Jesus." She had met the Lord, who changed her life.

It happens every day. Just recently a local church baptized

25 adults, most of whom grew up without a religious background. And a local mission that reaches out to people who are homeless often sees residents being healed from their addictions to become changed people.

Lives are changed through the message of the gospel in every country every day. The Lord Jesus changes lives through the message of the gospel—the good news that God forgives our sin and gives us new life through his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus still saves today!

Lord, reach into the lives and hearts of everyone who needs to be changed by you. Lead them to find the help and hope that they need. In Jesus, Amen.

DOES GOD ANSWER PRAYER?

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. . . .

—James 5:16

In the book *Huckleberry Finn*, the main character—Huck, as he was called—needed fishhooks. Someone had told him that God always answers prayers, so for three days Huck Finn prayed for fishhooks. But he received none. So he concluded: “There ain’t nothing in it.”

James tells us that the prayers of a righteous person are powerful and effective. Jesus said that if we ask anything in his name, he will do it. In Isaiah 65:24 we’re told that God answers before we even call on him. And yet there seem to be so many unanswered prayers. We pray for healing, but healing doesn’t happen. We ask for open doors, but one door after another slams shut. We plead with God to help us overcome an addiction, but there’s no change.

Does God answer prayer? Of course he does.

But prayer is not meant to give us anything we might want. God promises to give what we ask for when we ask in line with his will for our lives and for his world (1 John 5:14-15).

We pray in order to connect with God and to share how thankful we are for who he is and all he has done for us. Praying is our communication line with the Lord. He hears all our prayers and answers them according to our needs and according to his will.

Thank you, Lord, for hearing us and for answering our prayers. Help us to understand that you know exactly what we need, and that you answer our prayers accordingly. Amen.

WHAT IF YOU CAN'T PRAY?

We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us. . . .
—Romans 8:26

As a pastor, I have sometimes heard members of the church say, “I can’t even pray anymore.” When people are depressed or physically run down or overwhelmed by grief, they can sometimes find it impossible to pray.

Perhaps you’ve had times in your life when you simply did not have the strength to pray. If so, don’t worry. God loves you, and he knows exactly how you feel; he understands why you can’t pray. He knows what’s happening in your life.

What’s more, as Paul writes in Romans 8, “The Spirit [of God] helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us.” And in the same chapter we read that “Christ Jesus . . . is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us” (Romans 8:34). So our Lord and God, who

loves us, has us covered. When we can’t pray, the Holy Spirit and the Lord Jesus are praying for us.

Don’t be afraid to admit that you can’t pray. Ask a family member or friend to pray with you or for you, even if it’s on the phone. During the past year, on several occasions, I have prayed with one of my sisters when she found it difficult or even impossible to pray. Sometimes the Holy Spirit may even use *us* to pray for people who cannot pray.

Holy Spirit, thank you for praying for us when we find it impossible to pray. Please pray for us each day and help us to remember that you and Jesus pray for us. Amen.

IS THE BIBLE ENOUGH?

"If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

—Luke 16:31

One day, after I had led a funeral service, someone said he wished that a family member who had died would send a text or email to let him know that everything the Bible said about life after death was really true. Only then would he be convinced, he said. In his own way he was saying that the Bible is not enough.

In the parable we have read today from Luke 16, Jesus was speaking to people who had not really believed what God had taught them in the Scriptures, which were also called "Moses and Prophets." These people were stubborn, and they were often attracted to the idea of having great wealth. But Jesus said, "You cannot serve both God and Money" (Luke 16:13). And he told them this parable to illustrate that truth.

For the rich man in this parable, Moses and the Prophets

were not enough. He thought that if only someone from beyond the grave had warned him, he would not be in hell, the place of torment. But Jesus made clear that if someone did not listen to Scripture, they would not be convinced even if someone rose from the dead.

In 2 Timothy 3:14-17 the apostle Paul reminds us that the Bible is "God-breathed" and is able to teach us about salvation in Jesus Christ. If you have questions, turn to the Bible. It tells you everything you need to know about how to live and how to find the amazing gift of eternal life through Jesus.

Dear God, help us to listen to the Bible. Take away our doubts and unbelief, we pray. In Jesus, Amen.

WHY BOTHER WITH CHURCH?

"I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."
—Matthew 16:18

In his book *Church: Why Bother?* Philip Yancey tells a story about a prostitute who had reached the end of the road. She was desperate and did not know where to turn. Someone suggested connecting with a local church. She answered, "Why would I do that? I feel bad enough about myself already. They'd only make me feel worse."

When I asked someone once why he had given up on going to church, he said, "There's nothing there for me."

According to a recent survey, some 75 percent of people today are saying, "Why bother with church?"

The answer to that question is found in today's Bible reading and is summed up in just one phrase, where Jesus says, "I will build my church."

The church is not an ordinary organization founded by just anyone. The church is founded by Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior who is the head of the church. According to the Bible, the church is the body of Christ. Belonging to the church is a privilege not to be taken for granted.

The church is here to continue the work of Christ on earth and to build God's kingdom. You and I need the church in order to be equipped for service, to enjoy the fellowship of other believers, and to honor our Lord through faithful worship.

Lord Jesus, thank you for your promise to build your church here on earth. Thank you for allowing us to be part of your church. Amen.

DO WE CARRY EACH OTHER'S BURDENS?

Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.
—Galatians 6:2

Several years ago, while serving a church in California, we held an open forum for divorced people. One divorced woman said, "When I needed the church the most, it was not there for me." More recently, a church magazine quoted a prisoner convicted of a serious crime as saying, "In my moment of greatest need, my church family abandoned me."

It's easy to walk right past people who are burdened—sometimes because we don't know, and other times because we don't want to be bothered. Thank God, though, that there are many church members who make it their business to carry the burdens of others. Some go out of their way to invite someone for dinner who has no family. Others faithfully pray for people they know who are dealing with hardships, and some send a card to let people

know that someone is thinking about them. Still others faithfully call on people who can't get out. One dairy farmer I know sent 10 cows to a fellow church member whose dairy farm was struggling.

And that, according to Galatians 6:2, is the way things should be. We are to carry one another's burdens. When you find yourself in church, take a look around and try to see who might need you. Go through your church directory, and send a card to or pray for someone who is carrying a heavy load. Reach out to people in your local community also. And keep fulfilling the law of Christ by showing his love.

Lord, open our eyes to see the burdens of others, and open our hearts to reach out in whatever ways we can. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

DOES THE CHURCH LET ITS LIGHT SHINE?

"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

In his book *Christ in Crisis*, Jim Wallis says that the church has often failed to let its light shine. It has, he says, failed to speak out against injustice, racism, and poverty—and, too often, it has “passed by on the other side,” like the priest and Levite in Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).

As the church, we do well to listen closely to Jesus when he calls each of us to let our light shine so that God, our Father, may be glorified.

Does your church do everything it can to let its light shine? Do we go out of our way to speak out, and do we do everything we can to reach out to people who are struggling, or oppressed, or persecuted, or needing God’s love and help in some other way? There are so many needs and so many opportunities—not just in other countries but also

in our own neighborhoods and communities.

In his book *God Came Near*, Max Lucado tells a story about four candles in a closet that refused to come out to bring light during a power outage. One candle needed more time to get ready. One candle said that giving light was not her gift. Another was too busy, and the other didn’t feel qualified.

What’s *our* excuse?

Lord, help us all to let our light shine wherever you place us. Help us to reach out to people who are often ignored or overlooked in our communities. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

IS THERE LIFE AFTER DEATH?

"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" —John 11:25-26

Not long ago I had the privilege of preaching on this text at the funeral of a close relative. To some people, the claim of Jesus about life after death might sound like nonsense. They might well ask, "How could any intelligent person think that Jesus' claim here is true? When people die, they don't go on living."

Their skepticism would make sense if it were just *any of us* making that claim. But the person speaking here is Jesus, the Son of God, the Savior. And he later backs up his claim by raising Martha's dead brother back to life (John 11:38-44). Then, after Jesus himself was crucified, died, and was buried, he showed his power over death by rising from the dead to prove that he is "the resurrection and the life." (See John 19-20.)

Through his birth, death, and resurrection the Lord Jesus assures us that there *is* life after death. The grave is not the end for those who die. Death is a stepping stone into eternal life for everyone who believes in Jesus as Savior. The one condition is that we believe in him. The question Jesus asked Martha is a question that *we* have to answer as well.

Do we believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life? The answer to this question will determine whether we live after we die.

Lord Jesus, help us to believe that you are the resurrection and the life. Give us the assurance that you have overcome death for us. Amen.

SHOULD CHRISTIANS BE AFRAID OF DEATH?

The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

—1 Corinthians 15:26

While visiting an elderly member of our church, I read the passage in John 14:1-6 where Jesus promises to prepare a place for us. When I was finished reading, she said she did not understand why it should take the Lord *so long* to get her place ready. She added, “I don’t need anything fancy.” Instead of being afraid of death, she could not wait to be with the Savior.

But not every Christian faces death without fear. Shortly before he died, my dad asked, “Will God accept me when I die? So much has gone wrong in my life.” Someone else asked me, “Will everything be all right when I die?”

If you are afraid of death, be willing to admit it. The apostle Paul calls death “our last enemy.” We have been created *to live*. It was the fall into sin that brought death into our lives.

It’s natural for us to want to live and keep on living. So it’s also natural to fear death, which can be painful and scary—even terrifying. But Jesus came to free us from sin and from the threat of death. He gave up his own life for our sake, and then he rose from the dead, so “death has been swallowed up in victory” (1 Corinthians 15:54). Only the Lord can take away our fear of death.

We have the guarantee that even as we near death, we don’t have to be afraid because God will be there with us and will take us to live with him!

Lord Jesus, thank you for overcoming death for us. Please be close to us when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4). In your name we pray. Amen.

DO CHRISTIANS DOUBT?

“If you can?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.” Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”
—Mark 9:23-24

In a sermon on today’s text I said that sometimes even Christians have their doubts. The next day I received a phone call from someone who told me I was wrong. A Christian, he said, does not doubt.

But, of course, some Christians *do* doubt. Some of us have even said the same thing that the boy’s father said to Jesus in the story we have read today: “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”

In this Advent season we are asked to believe that the baby born in a stable in the town of Bethlehem was the Son of God, born not of an earthly father but conceived by the Holy Spirit. We are asked to believe that this child would be the Savior of the world and that through him we can have eternal life. There are so many things we are asked to believe,

and many of them go against human reasoning.

Most of us have moments in our lives when our faith is weak. Some situations in life can make us doubt. Even John the Baptist, who once boldly said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” began to doubt when he was in prison (John 1:29; Luke 7:18-23).

When doubts come into your life, talk about it to a Christian friend, and tell the Savior. Read the Bible, ask Jesus to remove your doubts, and be assured that everything you’ve learned about God is true. He is able and willing to strengthen you.

Lord in heaven, we too believe, but sometimes we doubt. Please help us overcome our unbelief. Amen.

REJOICE ALWAYS?

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

—Philippians 4:4

Here the apostle Paul, who endured many hardships for the sake of Christ, tells us to rejoice in the Lord *always*. And with enthusiasm he exclaims, “I will say it again: Rejoice!”

In the coming week many of us will hear Christmas carols that encourage us to rejoice, and at Christmas celebrations we will hear about “good tidings of great joy” (see Luke 2:10).

But for some people the Christmas season is not filled with joy. Some dread the Christmas holidays because of circumstances in their lives. Someone wrote to tell me that for her the month of December was the most difficult month of the year because of many sad things that had happened to her family. Someone else wrote that she would give anything if someone would cancel Christmas

because she would be all by herself. For some there seems to be no joy at all.

Of course, the joy that Paul talks about goes much deeper than trying to look on the bright side of things. And we are not being told to rejoice in tragic things that may happen to us. We are urged to rejoice *in the Lord*, because Jesus came to save us from sin and death. In him we are forgiven. Because of Christ, we can rejoice even with tears in our eyes. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you rejoice in the Lord, regardless of your circumstances.

Lord in heaven, help us to find your joy even through our tears, and help us to remember that you have come to turn our mourning into joy. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WHY SHOULD THIS HAPPEN TO ME?

“Why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”
—Luke 1:43

Elizabeth was utterly amazed. She could hardly believe what was happening to her. Not only was she expecting a child in her old age, but she also had the awesome privilege of meeting the mother of the Lord Jesus. Filled with the Holy Spirit, she exclaimed, “Why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”

Why me? I’m sure some of us have asked this question at one time or another for a variety of reasons. Something unexpected happened in our lives, and we could not help asking, “Why me?” We tend to ask this question especially when things go wrong. Maybe we have lost someone we have loved. Perhaps we have had to deal with a physical disability, or we were diagnosed with a terrible illness. We may have lost our job, or our business may have failed, and the question was right there: Why me?

But there is a more important question in this Advent season: Why should *we* have the privilege of getting to know the Savior? Why should *we* be so privileged that the Lord should come to earth for people like us, who did nothing to deserve his coming?

As we approach the celebration of the birth of the Savior, we do well to ask, Why should we be so favored? Let us stand amazed that God should love us so much that he sent his only Son to bring us back to himself and give us eternal life?

Lord, our God, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of the Savior, we ask that through your Holy Spirit we can feel something of the awe of Elizabeth. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.

IS JESUS COMING TO YOUR HOUSE?

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. —John 1:14

A story is told about a group of animals that were living together in a stable. There were all kinds of animals: mice, sheep, some chickens, some cows, a donkey, a horse, and even a rat. They lived together as a family, and their stable was their home.

Then one day a little mouse heard a rumor. He heard that someone was coming to their house. In his excitement he jumped on top of the horse and shouted, "Someone is coming to our house." And then he whispered, as if it were a secret, "Joseph and Mary are coming to our house, and Mary is going to have a baby."

That story prompts me to ask, Is Jesus coming to *your* house? As you are about to celebrate the birth of Jesus, ask yourself this question. As we have our parties and exchange gifts, do

we pay attention to what we are celebrating? Will the birth of Jesus be at the center of our celebrations?

On the first Christmas, the Lord Jesus "moved into the neighborhood" (John 1:14, *The Message*). That's Christmas in a nutshell: the Lord Jesus has come into our world and into our lives.

Will we invite him into our hearts? That's the important question each of us must answer.

Lord Jesus, help us to concentrate on what Christmas is all about. Help us to worship you, our Savior, and help us to make room for you in our lives. Amen.

WHAT IF GOD WERE TO DISRUPT YOUR LIFE?

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

—Matthew 1:24

Some things in life can take us completely by surprise. Sometimes things happen that seem to turn our world upside down. That happened to a man named Joseph, a builder living in the town of Nazareth in Galilee about 2,000 years ago.

Engaged to be married to a young woman named Mary, he was looking forward to when they would become husband and wife, have children, and make a home together, surrounded by their extended family.

But then Joseph learned that Mary, his future wife, was expecting a child. To Joseph, that meant that Mary had been unfaithful. To keep her from being publicly disgraced, he intended to “divorce her quietly” and then send her away.

But that same night, an angel came to Joseph in a dream,

telling him that the child to be born was conceived by the Holy Spirit. The angel told Joseph to believe the unbelievable and to take Mary as his wife. God himself stepped into his life and disrupted many of Joseph’s plans. His life would never be the same. But when Joseph woke up, he did what the angel commanded him.

Perhaps God has disrupted your life. Perhaps he turned *your* life upside down. Are you ready to accept God’s will for your life? Are you ready to surrender to him and serve him?

Father in heaven, help us to accept your will for our lives, even when it turns our world upside down. Help us always to acknowledge Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Amen.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO CELEBRATE?

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled."
—Luke 1:38

Some years ago, a Christmas musical included Mary saying, "If the Lord has spoken, I must do as he commands. I will put my life into his hands. I will trust him with my life."

That was Mary's response to the surprise announcement that she would be the mother of the Son of God. Whatever the consequences, she was able to say, "May your word to me be fulfilled."

Mary was ready to surrender her life to the Lord, even if it meant that she might be disgraced in the eyes of everyone who knew her. And because she trusted the Lord with her life, she became the mother of Jesus and could celebrate the coming of the Savior. Mary took God at his word, accepted God's will for her life, and placed herself in God's hands.

That's what it takes to truly celebrate Christmas: to believe what is completely unbelievable to many people, to accept God's will for our lives, and to place ourselves in God's service, trusting that our lives are in his hands. Only then will we be able to celebrate the true meaning of Christmas.

Ask the Holy Spirit today to help you trust God with your life and to turn the controls of your life over to him. When you do, your life will never be the same.

Lord, our God, please give us faith to believe that the child we celebrate on Christmas is your Son, our Savior. Help us to acknowledge him as Lord and to trust him with our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.

GOOD NEWS, GREAT JOY!

"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord." —Luke 2:10-11

At the time when Jesus was born, life for shepherds was hard. Their days and nights were spent in the dreary routine of taking care of sheep. Society looked down on them as lowlifes and scoundrels. They had little reason to be joyful.

But shepherds were the ones to whom the angel brought the good news that would cause great joy: A Savior had been born! It was God's way of saying that he identifies with the down and out, the outcasts of society, the undesirables. And on that night, whatever darkness they were facing was transformed into the most beautiful light they'd ever seen, as the angels of heaven joined in singing, "Glory to God in the highest. . . ." For those shepherds out in the fields of Bethlehem, life would never be the same.

Perhaps on this Christmas Day you are finding it difficult to feel joy. Perhaps there is an empty chair at your table. Perhaps you're thinking about a family member who has turned away from the Lord or is no longer a part of your life. Perhaps you have been diagnosed with a terrible illness. Whatever the reason, you don't feel like celebrating.

If so, the Christmas message is for you. There is good news with great joy also *for you*. Why? Because the Savior came to make things right. He came to heal the brokenhearted, to bring light into your darkness.

Father in heaven, help us to catch a glimpse of the light the Savior came to bring. We ask this in his name. Amen.

DID YOU SEE THE SAVIOR?

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation. . . .”
—Luke 2:29-30

Simeon's life was complete. This was the moment he had been waiting for. The Lord himself had promised Simeon that he would not die before he would see the Savior, the Lord's Messiah. That moment had arrived; Simeon was privileged to see the Savior face to face and to take him in his arms. He needed nothing more, and he was ready to let go.

Many of us have now celebrated Christmas. We've had parties and exchanged gifts. Many have heard a message about the coming of the Savior. And we need to ask ourselves, Did we see the Savior, or did we just go through the motions? As we sang Christmas carols and listened to a message, did we realize who we were singing about, and did we realize that we were hearing about the most important event in history? Did we see the Savior?

Today we can see the Savior only with eyes of faith. To see him, we must accept his invitation to come to him, receive him as our Lord and Savior, and be ready to serve him in whatever way he calls us. It is the most important decision we can ever make. And when we do, we can say, like Simeon, “Lord, we have seen your salvation.”

O God, please open our eyes so that we can see the Savior with eyes of faith. Help us to receive Jesus as our Lord and Savior. We ask in his name. Amen.

ARE WE READY TO LET GO?

Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. —Philippians 3:13-14

In one of his books, Max Lucado tells a story about the late champion boxer Muhammad Ali taking someone to his barn where he stored his trophies and awards. Standing in the doorway, he pointed to his many trophies and said, "It ain't nothing." He had come to the conclusion that when all is said and done, his accomplishments meant very little.

Centuries earlier, the apostle Paul looked back on his life and on all the things he had been proud of, and he said, "Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss. I consider them rubbish." Paul said this not because he had a debilitating disease like Muhammad Ali but because he had met the Lord Jesus. He was ready to let go of whatever was behind him so that he could serve the

Lord and live by the power of the risen Savior.

As we are about to enter into a new year, are we ready to let go of all the things that might keep us from experiencing the power of Christ's resurrection? Are we ready to let go of all the things that at one time seemed all-important? Ask the Lord today for the grace to toss out everything that stands in the way of serving him.

Lord, help us to be willing to let go of the things that stand in the way and that keep us from experiencing the power of our risen Savior. In your name we pray. Amen.

HOW CAN WE LIVE BY THE SPIRIT?

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other.

—Galatians 5:16-17

According to the apostle Paul, each of us has a battle going on inside us. The *Living Bible* puts it this way: “Two forces within us are constantly fighting each other to win control over us, and our wishes are never free from their pressures.” Which force is going to win? What will it take for us in the coming year to live by the Spirit?

Paul helps to answer these questions. If we are to live by the Spirit, we have to stop acting as if we are in control of our lives. We have to let ourselves be led by the Spirit of God. We must “obey only the Spirit’s instructions.” We need to stay in step with the Holy Spirit. Only the Holy Spirit can help us become and be what the Lord wants us to be in the coming year.

We have to listen to what the Spirit tells us by turning to the book of the Spirit, the Bible. We have to pray each day to be filled by the Spirit. And Jesus himself assures us that God, who dearly loves us, will “give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:13).

“Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. . . . Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me. . . . Spirit of the living God, move among us all . . . [and] make us one in love; humble, caring, selfless, sharing.” Fill us, we pray, with all your fullness. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO BE SUCCESSFUL?

The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

—Matthew 25:40

The coming of a new year is a time to look ahead and ask ourselves, "What are we hoping for in the coming year? What are our dreams and aspirations? What will we do with our lives? Will we make a difference in this world? Will we be successful?"

Some are hoping to graduate this year. Others are looking for a promotion. Still others are hoping for healing. Many are hoping to make a new start in life. And all of us are hoping for a good year ahead.

Whatever our hopes or resolutions may be for the new year, let's take a few moments to ask ourselves, "What will we do for people who are down and out?" How do we plan to imitate our Lord in reaching out to people who are outcasts, who need help, encouragement, and a new start? Will we

take the words of our Savior seriously as he tells us that anything we do for people such as these, we are doing for him?

Some people I know bring a warm meal to long-term residents in a rundown motel. Others are active in prison ministry. Others pray daily for people who are alone and in need, and still others generously share their resources.

A bookmark in my Bible says, "Success has nothing to do with what you gain in life or accomplish for yourself. It's what you do for others!" And that is what Jesus teaches.

Lord Jesus, fill us with compassion for people who are least in the eyes of this world. Open our eyes to the needs of the people around us. Amen.

WILL WE REMAIN IN GOD'S GRACE?

Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." —2 Corinthians 12:8-9

Several years ago someone in our community gave me a book titled *In The Grip of Grace* by Max Lucado. A couple of tragic events had brought this person and her family back to the Lord and to the church. When she handed me the book, she said, "We found our way back because we were in the grip of God's grace." She had learned that we are all in the grip of God's grace—all of the time. Without that, none of us would stand a chance.

God's grace is what you and I need more than anything else. Without it we are nothing, but because of God's grace we can face whatever comes our way. That's what the Lord himself tells the apostle Paul. Paul lived with what he called "a thorn in [his] flesh, a messenger of Satan," that was tormenting him. He kept asking the Lord to remove that thorn. God's

answer was no, saying that his grace would be enough. No matter what, God would keep Paul in the grip of his grace, and Paul would be able to carry out the work God had in mind for him.

That's our assurance for the coming year too: Come what may, God will hold on to us and keep us in the grip of his grace. All we need to do is turn to Jesus to receive his grace.

Father in heaven, we thank you for your promise to hold on to us always. Please keep us in the grip of your grace. Amen.

WHAT'S AHEAD?

"See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. . . . They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain."

—Isaiah 65:17, 25

Isaiah 65 gives us a sneak preview of what's ahead. In the closing part of this chapter the prophet tells us what's in store for creation and for all who look forward to the Lord's coming again. We get a glimpse of what that will be like.

There will be no more hardships or struggles in our life on the earth. Instead of poverty and hunger, there will be plenty for everyone. Instead of violence, there will be peace. "The sound of weeping and crying will be heard no more."

Instead of suffering the effects of aging, we will enjoy youthful energy. Instead of having others enjoy the fruits of our labors, we will be able to enjoy them and share them.

In the Lord's kingdom of peace, everyone will be blessed. Even animals will not fight or kill; "the wolf and the lamb will

feed together, the lion will eat straw like the ox. . . . They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain."

Someday, perhaps sooner than we think, the Lord Jesus will return on the clouds of heaven. And on that day, according to Philippians 2:10-11, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess "that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Pray that that day may come soon!

Lord Jesus, come quickly to bring about your new creation, where there will be no more tears, no more crying, and no more pain. In your name we pray. Amen.

Today celebrates 70 years!

Since 1950, *Today* has helped readers refresh, refocus, and renew their faith through God's Word each day.



We give thanks to God for 70 years of faithfulness and to you for your continued support!

Visit us at TodayDevotional.com

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

Today

refresh, refocus, renew



ReFrame
Media



Back to God
Ministries International

1700 28th Street SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407
800-626-3060
info@todaydevotional.com
www.todaydevotional.com
facebook.com/todaydevotional



RETURN POSTAGE GUARANTEED
PORT DE RETOUR GARANTI

Today

refresh, refocus, renew



ReFrame
Media



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
www.todaydevotional.com
facebook.com/todaydevotional