

Today

May/June 2024

refresh, refocus, renew

True Happiness



ALSO: LIFE IN GOD'S KINGDOM—HERE AND NOW

Dear Friends:

Are you familiar with the theme at the heart of Jesus' teaching? Jesus was careful to make sure his listeners knew about the kingdom of God. And what is the kingdom of God? In a nutshell, Jesus teaches that, for us, the kingdom means that God's "will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).



In the month of May, Chaplain George Koopmans leads us in exploring how we can live as the people of God's kingdom even as we live in a world filled with corruption, greed, and selfishness. Reflecting on what it means to "act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with [our] God" (Micah 6:8), we have the opportunity to grow closer to the Lord as we seek to live faithfully in his world.

Then, in June, we'll reflect on the meaning of true happiness. According to the Bible, true happiness means living close to God and following God's plan for living in the world he has made. Rev. Hernandez Dias Lopes, the director of ReFrame's Portuguese language ministry in Brazil, helps us better understand this happiness we enjoy as followers of Jesus Christ. In truth, the happiness that we enjoy in Christ isn't merely a "happy" feeling but true blessedness that we experience here and now and for all eternity.

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

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

Kurt Selles

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**“Life in God’s Kingdom—
Here and Now”**
George Koopmans



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**ReFrame
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may

Life in God's Kingdom—Here and Now

George Koopmans

Jesus teaches that his followers are *in* the world but not *of* the world (John 17:13-19). As believers in Christ, we have been rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of light, the kingdom of God. We live in a world where corruption, greed, and selfishness abound—and yet we are part of God's family and citizens of God's kingdom.

So let's explore together what it means to live as the people of God's kingdom today—here and now. And let's reflect on the call “to act justly and to love mercy as we walk humbly with [our] God” (Micah 6:8). May we grow closer to the Lord each day as he calls us to live faithfully in this world.

George Koopmans has served as an ecumenical chaplain at Medicine Hat College in Medicine Hat, Alberta, since November 2021. Prior to entering into chaplaincy, he served as a pastor to two congregations—one in Minnesota (Luverne), and the other in Medicine Hat. George and his wife, Emily, have three grandchildren. Hiking, biking, and bird-watching are his favorite hobbies.

THE EVERLASTING KINGDOM

“The God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed. . . . It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever.” —Daniel 2:44

Long before Jesus came, God gave King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon an amazing, puzzling dream. Deeply troubled by it, the king called on his advisers to tell him both the dream and its meaning! With trembling voices they lamented that the king was asking the impossible (Daniel 2:1-11).

Daniel agreed that mere humans could not meet the king's demand. But Daniel explained that “there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries.” And Daniel explained that God had revealed the king's dream and its meaning to him in a vision (see Daniel 2:17-19).

Daniel told King Nebuchadnezzar that he had dreamt of an amazing statue that was destroyed by “a rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands.” The great statue represented the kingdoms of

this world, which rise and fall. But the rock represented the coming kingdom of God and Jesus Christ—and this kingdom would grow to fill the whole earth.

The Bible teaches that God calls all of us to believe in him and become a part of his kingdom. By trusting in Jesus, God's Son, as our Savior, we can have life to the full. So each of us faces a choice: Will I pledge my life to an earthly kingdom or to the kingdom of God? The way we respond makes all the difference in life.

Sovereign Lord, thank you for sending Jesus to give us full life in your kingdom. May we live for you each day. Amen.

FROM DEATH TO LIFE

Our old self was crucified with him so that . . . we should no longer be slaves to sin. . . .
—Romans 6:6

Obtaining my Canadian citizenship was easy—well, for me, at least. (It took more effort on my mother's part!) Being born in Canada qualified me for Canadian citizenship. However, becoming a citizen in the kingdom of heaven is more complicated. To be a citizen in God's kingdom, we must die and be born again.

In Romans 6 and in other passages, the apostle Paul speaks of being crucified with Christ, dying with Christ, being buried with Christ, and rising with Christ. Jesus teaches that unless we are born again, we will not see the kingdom of God (John 3:3). As Paul explains in Ephesians, we are "to put off [our] old self"—our old sinful nature—and "to be made new . . . to put on the new self, created to be like God in righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22-24).

Dying and being born again calls for a radical change in how we think and act. But this is not a transformation we can manage on our own. As Paul puts it, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).

God gives us new life through the Spirit, putting the old sinful nature to death. And even before that, the Spirit of God moves us to recognize our sin and our need for new life. So we pray in repentance and ask God for forgiveness, trusting in his power to save us through the finished work of Jesus Christ.

Holy Spirit, put to death every part of our sinful nature, and bring us to live all of life for the glory of God. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

SET YOUR MINDS ON THINGS ABOVE

Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

—Colossians 3:2

Being born again to live in the kingdom of God calls for a dramatic shift in our thought patterns. God comes to us and says, “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.”

But we may wonder, “If we ignore earthly things that need to be taken care of, won’t our lives just become more chaotic? Is God really telling us to quit focusing on the day-to-day matters all around us?”

Setting our minds “on things above” has to do with leaving our old sinful lives behind so that we can put on the new life we are called to live in Christ. Instead of living in “immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed,” we are called to show “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience,” and more. We are to live as the people of God’s kingdom. This means we regularly spend time with God, reading and study-

ing the Bible, praying, worshipping, enjoying fellowship with other believers, learning from Christian thinkers and artists, and more. In this way our earthly lives become increasingly focused on the greater purposes and good that God has in store for us while we live for him in this world.

If, however, we spend each day immersed in our old, selfish ways and in the false promises of the world, we will find ourselves drifting away from the full life God wants for us.

Jesus, draw our minds to focus on living for you. Starve out our sinful earthly desires, and bring us to flourish as joy-filled citizens of your eternal kingdom. Amen.

SET YOUR HEARTS ON THINGS ABOVE

Since . . . you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above. . . .
—Colossians 3:1

In my work as a campus minister I spend a lot of time with international students. Each year hundreds of students come to our community college from around the world. While some of these students simply come for a Canadian education, many have their hearts set on obtaining Canadian citizenship. The cost for most students is high. Many leave family and friends behind—in some cases for years. And along with having a rigorous academic schedule, many of these students work two or even three part-time jobs. Tired and hungry, they press on, for their hearts are set on graduation, work permits, permanent residency, and eventually citizenship!

To set one's heart on something means to desire it more than anything else, regardless of the costs.

At the center of setting our hearts “on things above” is desiring a relationship with the triune God and knowing his friendship and favor. Counting ourselves as citizens of God's kingdom moves us to live God's way rather than by the way of the world. And dreaming of the day when we will see Jesus face to face and be able to live in perfect joy for eternity—that is what God calls us to set our hearts on.

Heavenly Father, may our hearts burn with a desire to know you better and love you deeper. Claim our deepest affections and cause an ever-deepening homesickness within us until the day you bring us into your kingdom in all its glory. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

GOD IS JUST

“Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. . . .”

—Isaiah 1:16-17

Justice is an important attribute of God. Justice lies at the heart of God’s character. Because God is just, justice is a hallmark of his kingdom.

In the Old Testament, God’s people Israel were meant to serve as a physical, earthly representation of God’s kingdom that would one day fill the whole earth. As a result, we find countless calls for Israel to be a just nation because God is just. Judges were to rule impartially. Neighbors were to treat each other justly. Foreigners were to be treated justly and fairly always (Exodus 22:21; Deuteronomy 24:17-18).

But Israel failed again and again to exercise justice. That brought God’s discipline on them, and he sent them into exile. However, leading up to and during their exile, God spoke through the prophet

Isaiah to urge the people to change their ways. Isaiah also delivered songs of hope and praise describing what the kingdom would look like if the children of God would truly embrace justice in the land. (See Isaiah 2:1-5; 4:2-6; 9:2-7; 11:1-12:6.)

The God of the kingdom of heaven is the same God who led Old Testament Israel. His name remains synonymous with justice. And as citizens of God’s kingdom, we too are called not only to act justly but also to love justice.

We bow before you, Lord and King, to praise you for your justice. Empower us by your Spirit to truly love justice and to live by doing justice in this world. Amen.

NABOTH'S VINEYARD

Ahab said to Naboth, "Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden. . . ." But Naboth replied, "The LORD forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors."

—1 Kings 21:2- 3

When God gave Israel the land he had promised them, each clan received a tract of land as their inheritance. God also made clear that this inheritance was to remain in each family throughout the generations. When times were hard, some families in debt had to sell their land, but in those cases the sale was never meant to be permanent. (See Leviticus 25; Joshua 13-21.)

However, King Ahab of Israel was wicked and did not want to live in line with God's way. Near the king's palace was a vineyard owned by a man named Naboth. Ahab offered to buy the land from Naboth, but Naboth refused to sell because God had said the land should remain in the family to whom it was given.

That made Ahab angry, so, with the help of his wife,

Jezebel, he came up with a plan. They plotted to have Naboth put to death by having him accused of cursing both God and the king. Ahab then stole the dead man's land.

As the king of Israel, Ahab was responsible to be a representative of God, the true King. But this abuse of justice was intolerable, and Ahab and Jezebel would pay a heavy price. (See 1 Kings 21:17-29; 2 Kings 9:30-37.)

Perhaps our blood boils as we read of Ahab and Jezebel's actions, but are we outraged when we see injustice today?

Father, thank you for being a God of justice. Make us a people of justice too! In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

ENTER HIS REST

Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.

—Hebrews 4:11

Justice requires that debts be paid. God created us to love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. He also instructs us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

But every day we fall short of God's requirements, adding to our debt. Jesus, the eternal Son of God, came from heaven to become human and live among us. He kept God's law of love perfectly. Then, although he was innocent, he gave up his life on a cross for us, paying the debt of sin for all who would believe in him.

This is the good news that we are called to believe so that we can enter God's rest. In the Old Testament, some of God's people disobeyed and would not accept the good news that God would give them the promised land. They would not trust in God to bring them into his rest

(Numbers 14). And today, as the book of Hebrews explains it, the situation is similar: we need to trust in the good news of God's salvation through Jesus so that we can enter into his rest—enjoying the full, eternal life that God has in store for us.

This is also called the "Sabbath-rest for the people of God," and the Sabbath day is a weekly reminder pointing to that rest. Repenting of sin and placing our faith in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus brings us into his rest. So we do well to ask, "Have I entered his rest, or am I still struggling in my own strength to find peace with God?"

Lord, thank you for the gift of true rest through faith in Jesus. Amen.

THEY DESPISED GOD'S REST

"When will . . . the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?"—skimping on the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales. . . .
—Amos 8:5

Many of Israel's rich and powerful merchants and other leaders despised God's rest and justice. For them, the Sabbath was not a day for observing physical and spiritual rest in honor of God's promises to his people. Instead the Sabbath was an unwelcome intrusion into their crooked, unjust business practices.

It was as if they said, "When will this Sabbath be over so that we can overcharge for wheat, and use faulty scales to cheat the people? We will drive them into poverty so that we can buy them as our servants and slaves for the price of a pair of shoes! And in the meantime we will pretend we are good, God-fearing, law-abiding citizens."

Their sin was a violation of nearly every law that God had given to the people before

they entered the promised land. Israel was intended to be a nation of truth and justice, but the ruling class generally despised those important values.

God's verdict: "I will expel you from my kingdom. Not because I want to, but because you want to live unjust, unforgiven, and God-forsaking lives."

Let's examine our own hearts and minds to see if we are living in the way God calls us to.

Lord Jesus, send your Spirit into our hearts and minds today. Guide us into living by the values of your kingdom rather than by the ways of this world. Amen.

DO JUSTICE AND LOVE MERCY

What does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. —Micah 6:8

The prophet Micah spoke out for the Lord against the unjust practices of his day.

He pictured people asking how they might please God with offerings in order to pay for their sins: “What is it that God wants from us? How much must we sacrifice before God will be happy with us?”

The answer is simple and yet profoundly life-changing: As long as you practice injustice, it doesn't matter how much you sacrifice to God. The Lord calls you to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with him! Then you may bring your offerings and find favor with God.

Get rid of your rigged scales. Stop your price gouging. End the practice of driving people into poverty so that you can buy them as servants and slaves. Practice justice. And even more than that—love

mercy. Give freely to your poor neighbor rather than scheming up ways to make them your slaves. Find ways to relieve poverty rather than profiting from it.

At the college where I serve as a campus minister, foreign students often struggle financially. But many of them have been embraced by local churches. On Monday mornings when they come to school, they often tell me with beaming faces how their church communities have blessed them on Sunday. God smiles along with these students as he sees his people showing love and mercy.

We love you, merciful God. Teach us to love by showing mercy to others. Guide us to act with justice each day for Jesus' sake. Amen.

YOUR KINGDOM COME

“This . . . is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. . . .’”

—Matthew 6:9-10

Most of us face many, many choices each day. What clothes will I wear? What will I have for breakfast? What route will I take to work? What do I need at the store? Which tasks will I focus on?

There is one choice, however, that is far more important than all the others: Which kingdom will I serve? Where will I spend my best efforts—in the kingdom of God or in the kingdom or domain or country or community or family that I am dwelling in?

Jesus teaches us to pray, “Father . . . your kingdom come.” As we pray these words, we are making a commitment to living God’s way. “Your kingdom come” means, first of all, “Rule over me! Master my soul. Make me a loyal citizen of your kingdom.” It means, “Lord, rule in my life and master me in such

a way that my deepest desire is to walk with you. May your principles and ways be the air that I breathe.”

“Your kingdom come” also means, “Help me to see your kingdom advance in the people around me—my family, friends, classmates, coworkers, and neighbors. Help me to foster a love for kingdom living in them as well.” This also means seeing institutions and organizations align with the principles of God’s kingdom. And as the Lord’s kingdom comes, any forces that revolt against him will be overwhelmed and shattered.

Lord, in all that I think, say, and do, may I serve to advance your kingdom in my life and in the world around me. Lord, I pray today, ‘Your kingdom come!’ In Jesus’ name, Amen.

YOUR WILL BE DONE

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

—Matthew 6:9-10

When we pray, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we are asking God to help us follow the example of the angels and other creatures who serve God faithfully in the heavenly realms (see Revelation 4-5). We are praying that we may have the strength and the guidance to do God’s will as we live here on earth, as citizens of God’s kingdom—here and now. As God’s children, we want to serve him willingly and cheerfully.

But as anyone who has been tempted knows, there are also powerful forces, led by Satan, that try to lure God’s people away to join them in rebellion. Paul writes in Ephesians 6:12, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual

forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

All who have been redeemed through Christ are given new, eternal life. Yet we continue to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit of Christ living in us to live faithfully each day for the glory of God and his kingdom.

That is why we pray, “Your will be done. . . .”

In what ways are you doing God’s will today?

Heavenly Father, help me to do your will today. May my every thought, word, and deed be fitting for a citizen of your kingdom! In Jesus’ name, Amen.

FLEE FROM SINFUL DESIRES

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who . . . correctly handles the word of truth.

—2 Timothy 2:15

A woman from a local church volunteers three hours each Wednesday with our campus ministry. She gives grandmotherly advice, prays with students, and provides a lot of them with food. She is also a good storyteller!

She tells students that, years ago, she inherited a wolfdog. As a pup, he was content to live a dog's life, but when she moved north, where wolves still roam (and howl), the dog became restless and wanted to roam also. Then one day he ran off to follow the call of the wild and was seen no more.

In some ways a similar thing can happen in our life as followers of Jesus. Our old sinful nature still clings to us—and as the world calls out to us with alluring temptations, that old nature can stir within. Selfish and sinful tendencies can try to come back to life.

Social media and every other form of media make their impact. The people around us influence us greatly. We can also be “dragged away by [our] own evil desire and enticed” (James 1:14).

We do well to take time as individuals, as families, and as groups of believers to practice accountability, discussing some questions like these: “Is my life and what I believe in line with godly living and the kingdom of God? Or is it bending toward my old sinful nature and the values of the world?”

Holy God, remind us each day to examine our hearts, our minds, and our lives. Help us to stay faithful to your Word and your kingdom. In Jesus' name, Amen.

TREASURES IN HEAVEN

“Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.”
—Matthew 6:20

Some people have called this the greatest investment tip of all time.

Jesus tells his followers to store up treasures in heaven rather than on earth. Life on earth, as we know it, is temporary, and so are its treasures. Moths eat holes in clothes. Rats and mice chew up and ruin things we have set aside for safekeeping. Metals corrode and discolor over time.

Storing up treasures on earth might be a little more sophisticated today than it was in Jesus' day, about 2,000 years ago. We might invest in stocks and bonds, real estate, and other things. But none of that really changes the truth of Jesus' teaching. Markets crash. Inflation guts the value of our currency. It can happen slowly—or overnight. In Alberta a fire destroyed a garage filled

with dozens of vintage cars. Natural disasters bring enormous damage and destruction for millions of people every year.

Earthly treasures will never be secure. And, to top it all off, death quickly separates us from any earthly treasure we might accumulate.

But not all is lost! Jesus promises that when we invest our time, efforts, and resources into God's kingdom here on earth, we will reap dividends for eternity.

Lord, please give us your wisdom for living. All things belong to you. Help us to use the time, gifts, and resources that you give us to serve in your kingdom. Amen.

USING OUR RESOURCES FOR THE KINGDOM

“Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.”

—Luke 16:9

The parable of the shrewd manager is one of Jesus’ most puzzling teachings. It can seem confusing because the dishonest manager is commended for acting shrewdly. But this does not mean Jesus approves of theft and dishonesty. In this parable Jesus is challenging us to be resourceful with an eye to the future.

With a shocking illustration that grabs people’s attention, Jesus teaches a practical way of storing up treasures in heaven. Rather than simply gathering our earthly wealth for ourselves, he is saying, we should use our earthly wealth to make an impact for the kingdom of God.

This parable is sometimes called a crisis parable with an end-time meaning. In that way it is similar to Jesus’ parables in Matthew 25 about being

watchful and ready at all times to use our resources for God’s kingdom and to show his love to our neighbors.

There are hints in this parable about building relationships too. Could it be that the friendships we make on earth will stretch on into eternity? Could it be that making friends with homeless and hungry people will lead to fruitful fellowship with them in the new heaven and earth? We may need to grow in our understanding of what eternal life will bring.

The way we live today will follow us into eternity.

Lord, we have many questions about eternal life. Help us to see that it will be better than anything we can imagine! Amen.

BUILDING WITH CARE

If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward.

—1 Corinthians 3:14

My wife is an accomplished pianist. On occasion we attend a local symphony. When possible, she arranges for us to sit in a location that gives a clear view of the pianist's hands and feet. She watches the pianist's movements with intensity and amazement. While I thoroughly enjoy listening to the symphony, my level of enjoyment pales in comparison to hers!

In a similar way, it seems, God's children will enjoy varying levels of reward when they enter his kingdom in all its glory. Though everyone in God's presence will be filled with wonder and joy, apparently some will be rewarded with more blessing and joy than others, based on the life they have lived here and now.

The important thing, though, as Paul points out, is to "build with care," striving to base our lives on the foundation of

Jesus Christ. As God's children, welcomed into God's family through the finished work of Christ, we are called to live like Jesus, following his example in all we think, say, and do. And we are called to do this in line with the gifts and resources we are given.

In our daily living, we are called to love God first in our lives and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-40; see also 25:14-46). God grants salvation by grace alone and not through works (Ephesians 2:8-10), but God also rewards his servants for their faithful service. What an amazing God we serve!

Lord, we marvel at your grace and mercy! You add blessings upon blessings, and we praise your holy name! Amen.

THE FOREIGNERS AMONG YOU

"The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself. . . ." —Leviticus 19:34

The Bible includes a number of stories about God's people fleeing their homes to find refuge elsewhere. Abram and Sarai took refuge in Egypt because of a famine (Genesis 12:10). So did Jacob and his whole clan (Genesis 46). Elimelek and Naomi did something similar (Ruth 1:1-2). Jacob had also fled for his life after stealing his brother's birthright (Genesis 27:41-44). And Joseph and Mary fled with baby Jesus when King Herod sent soldiers to kill him (Matthew 2). As we read these stories, we are relieved to find God's people welcomed into foreign lands!

The Bible also instructs God's people on how to treat foreigners. Leviticus 19:34 makes clear that the foreigner was to have the same legal protection as the native-born Israelite. Like a neighbor, the

foreigner was also to be loved as oneself!

Our world remains a place where countless people flee from one place to another. Escaping from war, famine, persecution, and poverty, millions of people are on the move. Is there any reason to think that God would have his people treat foreigners differently today than long ago?

In what ways can we show God's love and care for the foreigners among us?

Lord, help us to love foreigners as we love ourselves. Please help us to see each person we meet as your imagebearer, and to love everyone as you love us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

OBEDY THE GOVERNING AUTHORITIES

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.

—Romans 13:1

I have never met a president or a prime minister. (I did see Queen Elizabeth II of England from a distance on two occasions, though!) As a regular citizen, I have little influence over the laws and policies of my country. My vote is just one among millions, and attending policy meetings does little to set the nation's direction. This is true for immigration laws and policies as well as for most other laws.

But just because I do not write my country's laws and policies, I do not have the right to ignore them or to rebel against them. Even when I think the laws are horrible and destructive, I do not have the right to break them. Thankfully, however, in many countries like mine, people have the right to protest unfair policies. And if a government's demand is in direct conflict with God's com-

mands, we must choose God's way (Acts 5:29). Still, Jesus taught his followers to give to Caesar what was due him (Mark 12:17), even though Caesar may have used taxes for unethical purposes.

Even when we are disillusioned with our government and its policies, we cannot use that as an excuse to treat other people poorly. Whether we are pro-immigration or anti-immigration, for example, the God who told Israel to love the foreigner among them also calls us to do the same, loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Lord Jesus, help us to obey our governing authorities as you did, and to love all our neighbors as ourselves. For your sake, Amen.

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”
—Luke 10:27

Soon after we moved into our house, new neighbors moved into the house next door. Their children were the same ages as ours. We found that we shared many of the same values. They were good neighbors, and our kids played together and even slept over at each other’s houses. My neighbor also knows that he can borrow my pickup truck whenever he needs it. Sometimes I smugly think, “I love my neighbor as myself.”

A teacher of the law tried to test Jesus by asking the way to eternal life. Jesus answered by summarizing God’s law, saying, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.”

Perhaps the teacher of the law should have left the matter there. But then he also asked, “And who is my neighbor?”

He likely expected Jesus to say something like “Your neighbor is someone who has the same faith and values that you have.”

But Jesus took the conversation in a much different direction. “Your neighbor,” Jesus said, in effect, “is someone with a different ethnicity and religion, from a people you generally despise. . . . Now go and love him too!”

Thank you, Jesus, for pushing us out of our comfort zones. Thank you for reminding us to love people who are different from us—even our enemies—for we are all created in the image of God. Amen.

GOD'S GROWING KINGDOM

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.
—Acts 2:5

On the day of Pentecost, God-fearing Jews from many nations were staying in Jerusalem. They were gathering to celebrate the Feast of Weeks that God had established for his people Israel some 1,500 years earlier (Deuteronomy 16:9-12). They all converged on the temple on Pentecost (fifty days after the Feast of Passover) to bring offerings of the firstfruits of their harvests. That day people from many nations heard the good news of Jesus for the first time. And about 3,000 believed and were baptized (Acts 2:41).

Scholars estimate that the world population was about 300 million people at that time. That is 1/27th of today's population. It took 1,800 years for the world's population to grow to a billion. Prior to the 1800s there were few formal immigration laws. But with

the world's population at over 8 billion today, almost every country has decided to regulate immigration.

Christians are free to differ and disagree over the details of immigration laws. However, as immigrants, migrants, refugees, and others cross borders today, many hear the gospel for the first time. God's people have the opportunity and responsibility to share the gospel with them. And as the gospel is shared, many people continue to enter God's kingdom each day! That of course is a good thing—regardless of our views on immigration.

Lord, we pray for every person who has left their homeland to find a new home. Enfold them into your kingdom, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

THE KINGDOM CONTINUES TO GROW

A great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. . . . Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

—Acts 8:1, 4

History has shown that the church has often grown during times of persecution. While the early church was growing rapidly in Jerusalem, it also began to spread widely as people scattered from persecution and “preached the word wherever they went” in the surrounding territories.

At the college where I serve as a campus minister, I often see a similar thing happening. Christian students come to the college from Africa, Asia, and South and Central America. Many of these foreign students have a passion for sharing the good news of Jesus with friends and classmates.

It is exciting to see the kingdom of God advancing as Christians from other lands reinvigorate the church here. It is also exciting to see the king-

dom welcoming newcomers among students who did not know Jesus before they came to this land.

I routinely meet people who are unhappy about the number of immigrants coming to the “West” from around the world. But for those who are kingdom-minded rather than country-minded, those objections pale in comparison to the joy of seeing God’s kingdom growing.

Lord God, thank you for Jesus, who bled and died for us and then called us to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, “and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). We rejoice and marvel at the growth of your kingdom! Amen.

A GREAT MULTITUDE

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

In our campus ministry we gather at 5:30 on Thursday afternoons for a time of worship, Bible study, and prayer. We also break bread and enjoy fellowship together. On one occasion, we had 16 people gathered from nine different countries. They were from Africa, Asia, Europe, the Caribbean, and North and South America. Sometimes people say that Christianity is a “Western” religion, but God’s kingdom is made up of people from all over the world!

Sadly, in Europe and North America, the church is growing stale. Countless congregations across Canada, the United States, and Western Europe have closed. Many others are struggling to remain open. Weekly attendance at worship services has been decreasing. Yet newcomers from other lands are breathing new life

into our worshiping communities.

Though many newcomers arrive in the “West” lacking financial resources, they often come with an amazing, infectious passion for Jesus Christ. We do well to embrace and enfold our brothers and sisters in Christ, seeking together to build revitalized worshiping communities. This helps us to glimpse what John describes in Revelation 7. It is hard to find anything more beautiful than worshiping together with people of every nation.

Lord, thank you for breathing new life into our churches through newcomers from all nations. Keep growing your kingdom, we pray, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

SERVING GOD, NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS

“A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. . . .”
—John 15:20

Are we living in “the last days”? Some people in nearly every generation think so. Yet there is one thing we can be sure of: the problems described in 2 Timothy 3 are happening today, just as in many other periods of history.

People have noted that Christianity has long had a privileged position in the “Western world,” at least since the time of the Roman emperor Constantine, who converted to Christianity. After the Edict of Milan in A.D. 313 and other developments, many of the laws in the Western world became rooted in biblical teaching. As a result, many people have been heavily influenced by the Bible on how to live their lives. This does not mean that all of these people, or even the majority, have been Christians. But Christians in the West have often been free of persecution, and yet that

has not been the case in other parts of the world. Nor was this what Jesus prepared his followers to expect. He taught them to expect persecution.

Today Christianity is fading in the West, and so is Christian influence on the laws and policies of Western nations. As time goes on, it may become harder for Christians to live day by day without being persecuted.

But there is no reason to fear or lose hope. The Lord is faithful, and the Lord is King. His kingdom is not of this world, and we are called to serve him, following the teachings of Scripture and living by God’s way of love.

Lord, in the face of many changes today, help us to live truly Christian lives. In Jesus’ name, Amen!

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. . . ."
—Matthew 5:43-44

These words of Jesus can surprise and even shock us. And who, exactly, are our enemies?

In the book of Psalms, King David spoke often of his enemies. David's enemies wanted him physically dead. They wanted to destroy his kingdom—which was intended to represent the kingdom of God. Those enemies were people who opposed the rule of God in the world.

If we follow Christ today, we might not encounter people who want us physically dead, but we certainly can come into contact with people who would celebrate the end of the church and the end of the Christian faith. We might also think of politicians as enemies if they are working to replace some of our nation's laws with measures that are openly against God's Word. While we

know that our citizenship is in heaven, we still live as residents of an earthly nation. Further, people who want to destroy our country may also be considered our enemies.

The apostle Paul says, "Hate what is evil; cling to what is good" (Romans 12:9). He does not say, "Hate *who* is evil," but *what* is evil. This means that while we may hate laws and policies and actions that are evil, we are still called to love people who promote and do such things. And we are not to slander or curse them but to pray for them.

Lord, help us to love our enemies. As we work against sin in this world, help us to remember that you loved us even when we were your enemies, as sinners. Amen.

ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

What good is it . . . if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?
—James 2:14

Many of us have heard the old saying “Actions speak louder than words.” But this statement is not always true. Sometimes a few careless words spoken in anger or frustration can cause irreparable damage. Like a spark that can set a whole forest on fire, words can be incredibly destructive (James 3:1-12). However, in many cases actions do speak louder than words. This is James’s point when he says that faith without deeds is dead.

Faith that does not lead to doing good deeds is useless, says James. A fruit tree that does not produce fruit only takes up space in an orchard. It is cut down and burned, and a new tree is planted in its place (Matthew 7:15-20). Because true faith produces fruit, we are often told that we will be judged according to our deeds. In Revelation 20:12-13 we

read that “each person was judged according to what they had done.”

Paul makes clear in Ephesians 2:8-10 that we are saved by grace and not by works. Yet James points out that all who are saved by grace will begin to produce good works. That is why in Matthew 7:15-20 Jesus says people can be known by their fruit—revealing whether they are citizens of the eternal kingdom of God or citizens of this world, which is passing away.

Help me today, Lord, to examine my life to see if I am producing fruit that shows I am a child of yours. Help me to put off my old sinful nature and to live for your glory alone. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

THE EDGE OF THE FIELD

“Do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you.”
—Leviticus 23:22

The small prairie city where I live is home to a large population of Canada geese. There are two reasons for this. Our power plant is located along the river, and the warm water that flows from the plant means there is open water all year long. In addition, there is a large food supply in the grain fields surrounding the city. Every day thousands of geese fly from the open waters and glean food from the fields before returning to the city at nightfall.

The habits of these birds remind me in some ways of God’s instructions to the people of Israel. They were to harvest their fields in such a way that there was plenty left for the poor and the foreigner. Similarly, the people were to leave their fields fallow every seventh year, and their vineyards and olive groves as well,

leaving the produce for people who struggled to make ends meet (Exodus 23:10-11).

Though farming practices and urbanization today have made those old gleaning practices impossible in many areas, God’s call to care for poor and needy people still stands. And many charitable organizations have found ways to help others who cannot provide for themselves. As followers of Jesus, what can we do to help needy people in the places where we live?

Lord, give us insight to follow your call to show love and mercy to our neighbors—both nearby and far away. Help us to find truly helpful ways to be a blessing to people in need. Amen.

I WAS HUNGRY

"I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. . . ." —Matthew 25:35

I meet a lot of hungry people at the college where I serve as a campus pastor. Some are hungry because they are too busy to cook and eat. I know a student who works the night shift, catches a couple of hours of sleep, and rushes off to her 9:00 a.m. class. She later arrives at our interfaith center and is hungry. Other students are hungry because they are unable to find a job. They face the choice of paying tuition and rent or buying food. They cannot afford to do all three. Many full-time students work two and even three jobs to pay their bills—and sometimes even that is not enough.

In the world today nearly a billion people suffer from severe food insecurity. Millions face the prospect of starving to death. The causes of hunger vary widely—drought, war, sickness, disaster, unemployment, mental illness, addictions, and more.

One day each of us will stand before the Lord, and we will hear Jesus say either "I was hungry and thirsty, and you gave me food and drink" or "I was hungry and thirsty, and you gave me nothing." Each of us is also called to show God's love through the gifts and resources we have—however large or small.

We all have a choice. Which of those responses will we hear from the mouth of Jesus?

Lord Jesus, when we meet or see people who are in need, may we not turn away but recognize your invitation to show love and care, knowing that you are calling us to serve you. Move us to be people who love your mercy! Amen.

DON'T WORK, DON'T EAT

When we were with you, we gave you this rule: "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat." —2 Thessalonians 3:10

God makes clear in this passage and in other Scriptures that there are limits to caring for the needs of others. Paul taught the Thessalonians, "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat." Our responsibility to people who are capable of working but who refuse may be to admonish them rather than to support their laziness. As Proverbs 10:4 teaches, "Lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth." People are not necessarily entitled to live off the generosity of others. It is important to note, though, that Paul is writing to a church concerning their own members.

When it comes to applying this teaching today, we face a number of challenges. The first is to find out whether a person who is seeking aid is truly able to work and has the opportunity to do so. In our economic

systems today, it seems, there are nearly always people who are unemployed and unemployable. Though we may feel certain that an individual has the ability and the opportunity to work, we may be wrong. Mental illness can be a factor that is every bit as debilitating as a physical condition. And whatever the case, we are also responsible to establish relationships with people in the hope of having opportunities to lead them to know Christ, as the Spirit leads.

Lord, we know that you love a cheerful giver. Help us to discern when it may be inappropriate to give. And if we are not sure, help us to err on the side of mercy. Guide us in leading people to you, we pray. Amen.

CARING FOR PEOPLE IN NEED

"I needed clothes and you clothed me. . . ."

—Matthew 25:36

News reports have noted that the world has an overabundance of used clothing. In many ways, that is a good thing. Even the poorest of the poor can have access to clothing! But does that make Jesus' statement irrelevant in the 21st century? No. The clothing that people may have is not always suitable. A warm jacket in sub-zero weather is a necessity! There is also another sense in which people who sleep in a cardboard box in the dead of winter are in need of "clothing."

Extreme poverty still exists. There are countless people in the world with insufficient resources to pay for housing, buy food, and access medical care—not to mention paying for education and other costs to maintain a livelihood. What should our response be in the face of poverty?

The world is blessed with many organizations that strive to meet urgent needs and to uproot the causes of poverty. Issues are complex, and solutions are difficult to find. Though we may feel, and maybe often be, powerless to create effective solutions to these issues, a godly love for mercy calls for prayerful compassion when we are tempted to turn a blind eye.

We need to seek God's help and wisdom in caring for people in need.

Lord, move us to compassion for all who struggle in poverty. Help us to look for sustainable solutions. You created a world full of resources, and we pray for wisdom in their use. Amen.

I WAS SICK, AND YOU CARED FOR ME

"I was sick and you looked after me. . . ."

—Matthew 25:36

There are so many excuses people make for paying little or no attention to those who are sick: "I don't like visiting people in the hospital, it makes me feel uncomfortable." "I can't take the smell in the nursing home. There is a lady there who keeps yelling, 'Take me home!' and I can't handle it." "I don't know what to say when I am with that person." "Actually, isn't that the pastor's job? And, besides, I am too busy." Sad to say, I have tried to make these excuses as well.

Jesus simply cuts through it all and says, "I was sick and you looked after me," or, "I was sick and . . . you did not look after me." While our health-care systems can help with most of a sick person's physical needs, their spiritual and emotional needs remain. Visiting a person who is sick will often make a greater impact than

we know. Family, health care workers, and staff also notice when the sick are being visited.

Yes, visiting with people who are ill can sometimes be challenging. It pushes us outside of our comfort zones. But, as with many things, it usually gets easier with practice. And we will often find that we are blessed by making a visit! And what greater blessing can there be than to hear the Lord say, "I was sick and you looked after me"!

Jesus, we are experts at making excuses. Please fill us with compassion instead of excuses, and help us to truly care for one another. We pray in your name. Amen.

I WAS IN PRISON, AND YOU VISITED ME

Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.
—Hebrews 13:3

It is hard for me to forget the look on my neighbor's face. My daughter asked what I was planning to do that evening, and I said I was going to jail. The neighbor, sitting on his side of the fence that separated our yards, had a look of astonishment on his face. After dinner that evening, I headed over to the county jail with a group of men, and we shared the love of Jesus with some of the inmates there.

Visiting prisoners has been one of the richest experiences of my life. Week after week, we gathered with a group of mostly young men. We were in the highest security section of the prison. These were people charged with murder. If found guilty, they would likely be sentenced to life in prison with no possibility of parole. When these men entered the jail, they often prayed that

they would be found innocent. But after several months of meeting around God's Word, these men changed their prayers. They began to thank God for putting them in jail. They asked for forgiveness for their crimes and their sins. Joy replaced fear and anxiety. Having been on the path to destruction, they had met the risen Lord and were now living in the kingdom. Though in prison, they knew they were free in Christ—and few look forward to life in the new kingdom more than they do!

Jesus, help us to remember prisoners. We were all prisoners to sin and death—and you freed us, giving us new life! May we use our freedom to lead others to freedom. In your name, Amen.

KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK!

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. —Galatians 6:9

It can be hard not to grow weary of doing good. Physically tired, emotionally and spiritually drained, we might be ready to give up.

The brokenness in our world knows no end. There is always another hungry person to be fed. No sooner is a hospital bed open, and another person fills it. Someone who is healthy today will be sick tomorrow. In a sinful and broken world, there will always be hungry, sick, lonely, imprisoned, or impoverished people. Wars and rumors of wars will always produce refugees.

The world's problems will last until Jesus returns. In the meantime, though, we are encouraged, "Do not grow weary of doing good!" And only in God's strength can we continue.

We may certainly resign from a committee, leave a specific

ministry of mercy, and stop volunteering at a soup kitchen. But we must not grow weary of doing good! If we change ministries, we can still continue to minister in other ways.

In the end, as we become people who must be fed, clothed, and visited, our ministry may be reduced to a smile, an encouraging word, or a prayer. And that may be our most effective ministry of all.

By God's grace, may we all rejoice to hear the words "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

Dear Jesus, sometimes we grow weary and discouraged. Help us, in the power of your Spirit, to press on. Thank you for giving us eternal life and for welcoming us into your kingdom. Amen.

june

True Happiness

Hernandes Dias Lopes

Are you a happy person? The Bible encourages us to “Rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4). When everything is going well, it can be easy to feel happy and even joyful. But we can also have joy despite struggles and tough times that we may face in our lives. That’s because true joy is found only in the Lord God our Savior.

In the Bible, the word that is often translated as “blessed” can also mean “happy.” This can help us to see that being blessed refers to happiness that we experience when we live close to God and follow God’s way for living. The God who has made us, loves us, and calls us to enjoy life to the full has provided the way to happiness through Jesus. He came to save us from sin and death, and through him we can have eternal life, filled with love and joy in the presence of God forever.

God is intimately committed to our happiness. Seeking to live God’s way each day, in the name of Jesus, will bring abundant joy into our lives, to the glory of God.

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THE SOURCE OF HAPPINESS

You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

—Psalm 16:11

God created us to enjoy the greatest of happiness: communion with him. We experience true happiness by loving God and enjoying intimacy with him. In the presence of God there is fullness of joy.

The best gifts in life come from God. But some people prefer to look elsewhere. Many seek happiness in money; others, in fame. People also seek happiness in pleasures, or they follow their dreams of success, hoping to find fulfillment in their lives. But in the end they discover that those things offer only a mirage and not true happiness.

Happiness is a legitimate desire. Many people look for it eagerly every day of their lives, but they end up empty-handed.

The source of happiness is not in things or in our own selfish

pursuits, but in God. The best things of this world cannot make us happy, but God can, because he created us, calls us by name, and makes us his own. We become truly happy only when we know God and love him with all our heart and soul.

If we do not have a safe guide, it is easy to take the wrong pathways in life. And whom can we trust but God to faithfully show us the way?

Dear God, may nothing replace the joy we have in being in your presence. Help us always to find satisfaction in you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

HAPPINESS IN BEING CREATED BY GOD

We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

—Ephesians 2:10

Why are we here? What is our purpose for living here and now? Maybe you have asked or heard these questions before. These are philosophical questions that have kept some of the brightest people busy. Do you have an answer?

The Bible teaches that we are created by God and made in his image. "We are God's handiwork," and he sent Jesus to redeem and renew us so that we can have eternal life with him. God renews us so that we can do good, and this is our purpose in life. With the new life that God makes possible for us in Christ, we seek to live God's way and to do good so that we can show others the way to know God.

We find true happiness in being created by God for an extraordinary purpose. We are not a piece of wood floating

aimlessly through the ocean of life. We are not like a loose leaf carried by the wind. Life has a truly meaningful purpose. We are created by God to have full life with God and to shine the light of his love to others. God is the source and the destiny of our life.

The very meaning of eternal life is to know God and his Son, Jesus Christ, through the life-giving work of his Holy Spirit. There lies our greatest and most complete happiness.

What is the origin of life? What are we doing here? How will you help someone answer these questions?

Father God, our life only makes sense with you. Lord, guide us to live each day for the glory of your name. In Christ and by your Holy Spirit, Amen.

HAPPINESS IN BEING CARED FOR BY GOD

As for me, I am poor and needy; may the Lord think of me. You are my help and my deliverer; you are my God, do not delay.

—Psalm 40:17

One of the most comforting truths for our lives is the providence of God. The Lord Almighty takes care of us. The same God who created us also sustains us. In this comfort we live and move and have our being.

God is the one who gives us breath and everything we need. God gives life to the seeds and plants we need for food. God gives us our daily bread and good health to enjoy. He even gives flavor to our food so that we can savor it. God is the one who preserves our life and delivers us from evil. The Lord God is our creator, provider, protector, redeemer, and comforter.

The apostle Paul asks, “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all

things?” (Romans 8:32). Our life does not drift at random, at the mercy of mere circumstances. We are in the hands of the one who controls the universe.

How comforting it is to know that the God who rules the world is in control of our lives! It is a great assurance to troubled souls and burdened hearts to know that God cares for them. He is thinking about you right now and has not forgotten your pain and need. Knowing this, everyone who seeks the Lord can be filled with joy.

Sovereign Lord, thank you for your providence. From your hands we receive more than we need, that we may praise you and share with others. In Jesus, Amen.

HAPPINESS IN WHAT WE AVOID

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers. . . .
—Psalm 1:1

Happiness includes having the courage to avoid destructive situations. We can draw the line in uncertain friendships. We can walk away from compromising situations. We can say no to opportunities that could lead to wrongdoing. This is how God describes his followers who seek to honor him and to live by his Word. When we are supplied with wisdom from God, we can avoid misfortunes, regrets, and many troubles by learning to say no before it's too late.

Rather than walking in step with the wicked, “those who belong to Christ Jesus” can “keep in step with the Spirit” (Galatians 5:24-25). In Christ, we are given new life and “called to be free” (5:13). But that doesn't mean we are free to follow our old sinful nature. Rather, we are called to “serve one another humbly

in love” (5:13), following the whole law of God. If we walk in the way of the wicked, stand proudly with sinners, or sit dutifully among mockers, we will be just like them, and we will not enjoy the happiness of life that God wants for us. We will be blown away like dust in the wind, for “the way of the wicked leads to destruction.”

Psalm 1 is often described as teaching about the two ways: the way of godly wisdom, and the way of foolish wickedness. “Blessed [or happy] is the one who . . .” avoids the way of wickedness but delights in the way of the Lord.

O God, free us from sinful, foolish ways and guide us by your wisdom for living, in line with your law of love. Amen.

HAPPINESS IN WHAT WE DO

If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction.
—Psalm 119:92

Happiness is not just about avoiding the way of wickedness and folly. And it's not about staying away from people. The life of the monk or the hermit is not the ideal of the Christian faith, as some early Christians believed. Christianity is distinguished by a lifestyle in tune with the will of God.

How can we know what God's will is for our lives? Psalm 1:1-2 answers, "Blessed is the one . . . whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night."

The Word of God is our source of joy and happiness. We are encouraged to meditate on it daily. We must fill our minds with God's truth. We must feed our hearts with the promises that come from the Word of God. His Word is better than refined gold and sweeter than honey. God's Word restores

the soul and gives wisdom to the simple.

In this time when so much garbage circulates on the internet and other media, the Word is bread that nourishes and water that purifies. Through it we keep our hearts pure, and we triumph over the enemy.

Today and every day, remember to feed on God's Word and to enjoy the nourishment that sustains us, heart and soul, on the way to full life.

Lord and God, guide us in the way of wisdom and life through daily meditation on your Word. Thank you for the joy that comes from being in communion with you. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

HAPPINESS IN WHAT WE ARE

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.
—Revelation 1:3

Have you ever had the opportunity to read the book of Revelation? It is not an easy book to read, although many people are attracted by the astonishing events and mysterious characters on its pages. Focusing on things like the dragon or the beast or Armageddon can create fear and uncertainty in the hearts of many people. But the opening verses of this book give us the guideline on how to read it.

After a brief introduction we read, “Blessed [or happy] is the one who. . . .” And this is not a coincidence. We should not be surprised that a book described as “the revelation from Jesus Christ” should include these words. The Lord Jesus often taught his followers with words of blessing, known as beatitudes (see Matthew 5:3-12; Luke 6:20-23).

We are the Lord’s church, and as the opening verses show, the book of Revelation is written for God’s people. In fact, we who are God’s people receive not only the book of Revelation but also the entire Bible as a letter from God.

Though the book of Revelation can be challenging to understand, we can trust that we are safe in the arms of Jesus, who has saved us to live with him in the new heaven and earth (Rev. 21-22). And our calling is to live by his Word, showing his love to everyone around us each day.

Lord and God, the greatest happiness is to be a part of your people, knowing that we will live forever with you, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

HAPPINESS IN THE HOUSE OF GOD

I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD."
—Psalm 122:1

Have you felt the same emotion that the psalmist expresses here: "I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD'? In Psalm 84:10 we find a statement that aligns with this joy: "Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere. . . ." Today, wherever believers can gather for worship, that place can be called the house of the Lord. There we meet as brothers and sisters in Christ who gather to worship the one true God.

Around the world there are many different church buildings designed to be places where believers can gather to worship God. The King of the universe is not limited to a particular space or building. But a specially designed space can help us contemplate the Lord "in the splendor of his holiness" (Psalm 96:9). In the

house of God—that is, in a place of worship—we can gain a clearer understanding of the transience of life and the need for God's grace and forgiveness. And in the presence of God we are filled with joy to sustain us in the many challenges of our lives.

As the psalmist says, "Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you" (Psalm 84:4).

O God, my sin and self-pity try to keep me away from you. But draw me into your presence, meeting with others to worship you so that we may be renewed with joy to live for you each day. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

THE HAPPINESS OF BEING GENEROUS

In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

—Acts 20:35

As the apostle Paul states here, quoting from the Lord Jesus himself, there is more joy in giving than in receiving. Jesus, of course, knew all about giving. He gave up his glorious life in heaven to become one of us and even to die for our sake, so that we can live with him forever. And he has returned to heaven to rule there and to prepare a place for us. Think of all the amazing blessings that Jesus has made possible!

Money and material goods can be a blessing or a temptation, and that's why God urges us to be good stewards of all that he gives us. In addition, good stewardship is not only about what we give in church; it's also about the generosity we show to people in need. Generosity is not an occasional activity but a lifestyle founded on the gospel: "Freely you have received;

freely give," says the Lord (Matthew 10:8).

We are happy not when we accumulate treasures on earth, but when we gather them in heaven; not when we keep everything for ourselves, but when we give freely for the good of our neighbor.

Happiness is not in how much we have, but in how much we share. Is there someone in need near you whom you can bless with your generosity today?

Give me, O God, a merciful heart, willing to share with people in need. Remove selfishness from me so that I may be a generous giver. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

HAPPINESS, CONTINUOUS LEARNING

I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. —Philippians 4:11

A prison would surely seem more like a cage than a classroom. But some of God's faithful servants landed in prison, and they learned precious lessons from their time in captivity.

The apostle Paul, for example, waited in a Roman prison for two years to appeal his case to Caesar. And during that time he was able to share the good news of Jesus with many people who visited him (see Acts 28:16-31). Paul had been through many trials and hardships—all related to sharing the gospel of Christ. And he gave thanks that even “the whole palace guard” had learned why he was in chains (Philippians 1:13). Instead of allowing bitterness to fill his heart, Paul wrote, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.”

Happiness is not a reality that is outside of us; it is an atti-

tude that flows from within us. There are people who seem to have everything—and yet they have nothing. There are rich poor and poor rich. Though a person may be in chains, their heart can live in paradise. Others may tread on velvet carpets, but their soul can be in the torment of hell. Happiness is not automatic; it involves a learning process. We are happy when our source of pleasure is in God and not in material things, when our soul delights in the provider and not in the provisions. God is the source of our happiness, not things!

Great God, source of all good, when the satisfaction of our soul is in you, we can have joy, whether we are poor or rich or somewhere in between. In Jesus, Amen.

CHILDREN, A REASON FOR HAPPINESS

Children are a heritage from the LORD, offspring a reward from him.
—Psalm 127:3

If you have been blessed with children, do you see them as God sees them? In your struggles and challenges in raising children, do you look for encouragement in the Word of God so as not to give up in the task? Psalm 127 declares that children are “a heritage from the LORD,” and happy is the one “whose quiver is full of them.”

Children are a gift from God. And we do not generate children for ourselves; God gives them to us so that we may raise them to know him. Our children need to know that, like us, they are called to live for God and to serve him. God gives our children life and many good gifts so that they can grow to know and learn what their calling in life will be. Their calling might be different from ours, and it might be very different from what we expect. But we can trust that God will

guide our children so that their lives will glorify him. After all, God is their Creator, and they are his. They belong to him, body and soul, just as we do.

Our children are a blessing, not a problem or an obstacle in our lives. And as a part of God’s family, they may help us when we are in need, just as other family and community members do.

We are called to love our children and raise them “in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). As God’s gifts, they bring happiness and joy.

Father, help us to find happiness in the children you have given us. May we raise them to know and serve you faithfully. In Christ, Amen.

THE HAPPINESS OF A PURE HEART

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

—Matthew 5:8

Faith is not disconnected from happiness. If you imagine the Christian as sullen and gloomy, that is not what God has in mind. Happiness is a matter of the heart, and it has to do with holiness and purity.

As Psalm 24 says, those who have “clean hands and a pure heart . . . will receive blessing from the LORD.” They will be able to stand in the holy presence of the Lord. Or, as Jesus put it, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

Yet we cannot be pure in heart without the saving work of Jesus. As Proverbs 20:9 makes clear, “Who can say, ‘I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin’?” Only Jesus can say that, and only he has made it possible for us to be purified so that we can live in the presence of God.

If we think that happiness lies in the pleasures that the world offers, we are mistaken. The attractions of the world may give pleasure for a moment, but they do not satisfy the heart forever. The blessed are not people who give free rein to their passions. The blessed are those whose hearts are made pure through the power of God in Jesus Christ.

Indeed, they are abundantly blessed because God is the one who purifies them. They are truly and eternally happy!

Majestic God, you are the only source of true happiness. I ask you to purify and renew my heart in holiness. In Jesus, Amen.

THE HAPPINESS OF ALL WHO TRUST IN GOD

Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people he chose for his inheritance.
—Psalm 33:12

Is happiness found in social and economic policies? Or in educational and cultural programs? These things can be good and helpful, but a nation can only find true happiness when its people recognize the Lord. This occurs when hearts transformed by the grace of God seek to do his will.

In our pluralistic world today many people claim that all religions are equal and that all paths lead to God. Many national leaders today don't even recognize the Lord.

Is there any nation that serves the Lord today? Not truly. While some nations may claim to trust in God, their actions show that they follow the ways of the world. Even if they do some things right, their leaders seldom give credit to God. We should not be surprised, then, to see a moral and spiritual vacuum in so many places.

Wickedness leads to perversion, and ungodliness leads to immorality.

Within every nation, though, there are people who say, like the psalmist, "We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name." These are the people of God's kingdom, and they know true happiness is found in Christ. They share his love with others, and he says to them, "Well done, good and faithful servant[s]! . . . Come and share your master's happiness!" (Matthew 25:21).

Lord and God, you are the solution our nations need today. Help us to honor you and seek to live your way for Jesus' sake. Amen.

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?
—Ecclesiastes 2:24-25

Sometimes we think that people with more resources have the clear path to happiness. That is why famous artists, actors, athletes, and other celebrities have a large number of followers. We imagine them with the world at their feet and a smile on their lips.

The writer of Ecclesiastes, who probably was King Solomon, dedicated much of his life to the pursuit of happiness. He was the richest, most famous, and most sought-after man of his time. Without limitations, he sought happiness in wealth and the pursuit of pleasures (see Ecclesiastes 2:1-23). He amassed great fortunes and took on great building projects, but all of his money and influence could not bring him true happiness. He sought happiness in the pleasures of wine and feasting and love affairs,

but not even a great harem could provide satisfaction.

Ultimately, he sought happiness in fame and success. And the only thing he got at the end of his pilgrimage was a feeling of emptiness.

In the end he found that the object of his long search was actually the Lord, whom he had pushed aside! The happiness he sought in things and in adventures was in God, “for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?”

Lord, it is a frustrating and useless task to seek happiness apart from you. It's like chasing the wind. There is only happiness when you are at the center of our lives. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

THE HAPPINESS OF OBEDIENCE

"Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you." —Exodus 20:12

Most parents have to deal with disobedience from their children at some time or other.

In the Ten Commandments we find that children who honor their parents receive a special promise from God: the blessing of a long life.

Happiness is the result of obedience. No child can be happy being a nightmare to their parents. No child can build happiness on a foundation of rebellion.

Sadly, children who disobey their parents and other authorities often reap misfortune and tragedy. Many children shorten their days because they follow the slippery path of disobedience, get involved with harmful friends, and seek excitement in dangerous places. They turn away and cover their ears so as not to listen to their parents'

advice. But unfortunately they often do so to their peril.

Where can they look instead to find happiness and a life of blessing? As the Bible teaches, they can find happiness in obedience to the Lord, and that includes honoring their parents. Ephesians 6:1-3 summarizes this way: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother'—which is the first commandment with a promise—'so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.'"

Great God, we all need to respect the established authorities in our lives. Help us to start at home, honoring our parents, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

HAPPINESS TO BE ABLE TO HELP

Blessed are those who have regard for the weak; the LORD delivers them in times of trouble.
—Psalm 41:1

A compassionate heart is not among the most popular qualities in our world today. If you want to climb to the top, people say, you often have to trample on others. Compassion is considered an attribute of people who are weak. But what does God say about this?

The Bible says, “Blessed are those who have regard for the weak.” And this does not mean just thinking about people who are disadvantaged; it means caring about them and doing something about it. People who care are those who open their hearts with the willingness to share what they have with people in need. Generosity goes hand in hand with compassion and care as people seek to show God’s love in this world.

We find happiness not when we have everything in our hands but when we share with

people in need, giving from our abundance as the Lord has given to us.

The generous person sows happily and reaps the blessed fruit of God’s ongoing favor. God himself multiplies our sowing so that we can continue to give generously. God provides for us and gives us health and strength to do more by spreading his love to others. When we open our hearts, hands, and pockets to share from all that God has given us, we find joy and happiness in giving freely as the Lord gives, without strings attached.

Lord God, help us to open our hearts to care about others and to share from the abundance you have given us. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

HAPPINESS IN THE LORD

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

—Philippians 4:4

Sadness is the daily portion of many people. The world is full of suffering and hardship, and it can be difficult to find peace and happiness. As a result, people can become bitter about the adversity and struggles in their lives, and many blame God for their hardship and sorrow.

The apostle Paul, however, had a different message to share. Though he was in prison and had gone through many hardships, he knew he could find joy in the Lord, his Creator and Savior. He wrote to the Philippians: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”

Joy in the Lord is not a trivial or fleeting emotion. Instead it results from the deepest possible peace of knowing that your destiny is secure in God’s hands. As a result, a person can have deep and lasting joy

in the Lord even in the midst of great suffering and pain.

Life is not an amusement park. We face struggles and cross dark valleys. But our happiness is not a superficial, fleeting emotion. Our joy does not depend on the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

As Paul puts it, our joy is in the Lord. In other words, Jesus is the source of our joy. He is the content of our happiness. Our happiness is not just in the absence of bad things or in the presence of good things. Our happiness is in Jesus, knowing that he loves and cares for us and is with us always—forever!

Lord and God, help me to have joy in you, knowing that I am secure in you always. In your saving name, Amen.

HAPPINESS OF DYING IN THE LORD

I heard a voice from heaven say, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. . . ."
—Revelation 14:13

For most people, death stands out as one of their greatest fears. Death spreads panic and terror wherever it goes, without respect for age or social position. The Bible describes death as the last enemy to be defeated, and we take comfort in knowing that Jesus himself has already defeated death. What's more, Jesus has promised that all who believe in him will one day rise from the grave to live with him forever.

That is why the Scriptures speak of happiness despite the problem of death. In our reading for today, for example, we find a message that comes directly from heaven. This is not something that springs from someone's imagination. No, it comes to us by way of "a voice from heaven" that says, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. . . ." In other words, though death

may come to your body, your soul is safe with the Lord, who has also promised to raise your body to life again when he returns someday.

For all who die in the Lord, death does not have the last word. Death has already been defeated. To die in the Lord is to find rest from toil and struggle. To die in the Lord is to "depart and be with Christ, which is better" than remaining in the body we have now (Philippians 1:23). Those who die in the Lord leave this life behind and enter into the joy of the Lord.

O God, author of life, for all who are in Christ, death means resting in your arms. Your perfect love removes all of our fear. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

THE HAPPINESS OF HOPE

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope. . . . —1 Timothy 1:1

Hope is the light that illuminates our pathway in life, leading us onward with the promise of eternal, full life with God. For all who know Christ, hope is an essential part of the journey. Indeed, as the apostle Paul says, Christ himself is our hope.

Hope in Christ is not a mere wishful kind of hope that people sometimes talk about when they say, "I hope we have a beautiful day for our picnic," or "I hope our sports team wins the championship." If our hope is limited to this life alone, we will not find true happiness.

What's more, in Christ, our future is not uncertain. We are not heading into the unknown. Our end is not a grave or a tomb. Each day, even as we grow older and our bodies may grow weak and frail, we walk toward glory. We walk

toward full life with the Lord, who will one day come again.

We walk toward eternal happiness. As he did with Paul, the Lord pours his grace on us, mercifully forgiving all of our sins. Not one of our sins is too great for God to forgive; Christ's death paid for them all.

Believing in Jesus gives us hope for eternity. And that hope fills us with energy in the present, helping us to hold fast to Jesus and his promises.

Eternal God, only with our eyes fixed on Jesus can we enjoy the hope of full, eternal life with you. For this we thank you, in Jesus' name. Amen.

HAPPINESS IN BEING SATISFIED

We brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.
—1 Timothy 6:7-8

Books about how to get rich fill the shelves of bookstores and are bought up quickly. The main idea is that money can give us security and happiness. Some people preach that message in their churches too. But that is not the message of Christ and the Bible.

People who want only to pursue riches fall into temptation and end up tormenting themselves. Many have strayed from faith in their unchecked greed.

In contrast, the apostle Paul testifies that godliness accompanied by contentment is great gain. When we have enough to eat and clothes to wear, we can be content. Our happiness and our security are not in money but in God.

Is it bad, then, to have wealth? That is not what the apostle is saying. Money in itself is not

bad. But “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.” This is a helpful warning to believers who have been materially blessed.

Paul urges the rich not to trust in the instability of riches, but in God. Money can be good when we own it, but not when it owns us. Money is a good servant, but it’s a bad master. We can use money to bring happiness when we distribute it generously and wisely, but not if we greedily withhold it or keep it for ourselves.

Lord, help us to be content with having our needs supplied. And help us to share from the abundance you have given so that others too may be blessed—and praise you! Amen.

HAPPINESS AND RECONCILIATION

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."
—Matthew 5:9

Conflict can be difficult to avoid. Not even peace protocols and treaties ensure that nations will exist together without rivalries and tensions. Homes and families, which should be places of harmony and understanding, often become like war zones. In our cities, violence takes over in the streets. Even in sports, which should be a source of fun and healthful enjoyment, rivalries get out of hand.

Christians have a high calling: in a world that creates ever deeper rifts in relationships, we are called to build bridges. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." We have received the precious ministry of reconciliation. We are called to be ambassadors for Christ, through whom we call others to be reconciled with God (2 Corinthians

5:17-20). Instead of sowing conflict, we must strive for mutual understanding. Instead of pitting one against another, we should encourage alliance and cooperation. Instead of sowing discord, we should work to heal relationships.

Serving as agents of peace, we find happiness in the Lord. And as peacemakers we are recognized as children of God.

Loving God, only your grace can restore peace and bring forgiveness. Help us to work against breakdowns in our relationships. Help us to be agents of peace. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

HAPPINESS IN BEING GOD'S PEOPLE

Blessed are you, Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD?
—Deuteronomy 33:29

God's people are a blessed and happy people. They know the joy of having new life in Christ, and they have the sure hope of living eternally with him.

For all who belong to the people of God, it is good to be reminded of these words of Moses to God's people Israel. Moses wanted the people to remember how privileged they were, so he said, in effect, "Blessed are you, Israel! Who can be compared to you? The Lord himself has saved you."

God's people are blessed because they have been chosen by God from eternity. They are the object of God's loving care in all circumstances.

Salvation is the greatest of all gifts. It is a gift of eternal consequences. It is an expensive gift that all the riches in the world could not buy. This gift cost God the life of his own Son,

Jesus Christ. And through this costly gift God freely gives us salvation.

We cannot do anything to earn or accomplish salvation; nor do we deserve it in any way. God is pleased to give it to us by his merciful grace. Salvation and new life are an undeserved favor.

The happiness of God's people lies in this capital truth: we are saved by the Lord!

We praise your name, O God, for in your gift of salvation, full and free, we are truly and completely blessed! Thank you for loving us so much and for making us your people. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

HAPPINESS IN ETERNAL INHERITANCE

“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”
—Revelation 21:4

The book of Revelation speaks of conflicts and battles involving mysterious powers of evil, and we may wonder how and when such things might actually take place. Yet all who have hope in Christ have nothing to fear. The final result has already been announced. The Lord of heaven and earth has won the decisive battle through the finished work of Jesus, and the final triumph is assured. When the curtains of history close, there will be “a new heaven and a new earth” in which God lives with his people forever.

God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and mourning, death, and pain will disappear. Imagine the joy of living in the presence of the Lord, who has promised us his glorious inheritance. Our bodies will be renewed, and we will reign eternally with Christ. Sin will no

longer be present in our lives, because nothing impure can stand in God’s presence. There will be no sickness or suffering. All injustice and conflict will be things of the past.

All who are redeemed in Christ are welcomed into God’s kingdom by grace. Jesus is the only way that leads to God (John 14:6). And in the presence of God there is and will be fullness of joy forever!

God of all eternity, thank you that one day all our sufferings will cease and you will wipe every tear from our eyes. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

FLEETING HAPPINESS

King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them.
—Daniel 5:1

There are parties that end in tragedy. Our Bible reading for today talks about a party that ended with the sudden fall of a kingdom. This happened in the palace of the most powerful king in the world at that time. He literally saw “the writing on the wall” that told him his days were numbered (see Daniel 5:25-30), and the king was terrified.

The feast of King Belshazzar of Babylon included only select people. Nothing was missing at this party: the best food, expensive wines, beautiful women, even the golden goblets raided from the temple of God in Jerusalem. Then, in the midst of this revelry, a hand appeared and wrote a message on the wall. But none of the king’s guests or his wise men could read it.

The rest of Daniel 5 explains that Daniel was summoned

to interpret the writing on the wall. It was a message from God announcing the end of Belshazzar’s kingdom. And on that night the kingdom was overthrown.

How hard it is to hear that one’s kingdom is coming to an end! Maybe the words come from a doctor or in a bankruptcy declaration. Maybe the greatest of dreams and plans has gone up in smoke. We cannot live in a way that goes against God or is indifferent to the eternal life that only God can provide. Why would we want just fleeting happiness when the true God offers us life forever, full and free?

Lord, we know that seeking pleasure at all costs brings bitter consequences. Spare us from ruin, turning our hearts to follow you. Amen.

FALSE HAPPINESS

Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. . . .
—Ephesians 5:18

In Brazil there is a popular festival each year called Carnival. Sponsored with public funds and promoted by political authorities, Carnival attracts millions of tourists from around the world. Parading cars and floats with all kinds of decorations fill the main streets of large cities. Samba schools parade to the rhythm of the batucada before the euphoria of a crowd thirsty for pleasure. Carnival is the festival of masks. Sadly, it is a drunken party. Carnival is a vain effort to find joy where there are only ashes of frustration.

The false joy that Carnival promotes leaves a bitter taste. In the setting of this festival, decency is sacrificed, immorality is celebrated, and the wise values of dignified family life are tossed aside.

Lulled by amazing spectacles, the crowds jump and dance,

animated by worldly ideas of joy. But people's hearts at the end of this event are empty. Carnival, in fact, is a party where true joy does not find expression.

Instead, however, we can give thanks that God offers us true happiness. We are invited to be filled with the Holy Spirit, who makes our bodies a holy dwelling place for God (1 Corinthians 6:18-20). Only in the Lord can we find the peace and tranquility that our souls long for.

Blessed God, transform our hearts. Free us from trying to solve our problems and to escape our struggles with the excesses of empty celebrations. Turn us to find true life in Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

HAPPINESS OF THE UNITED FAMILY

Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in obedience to him.
—Psalm 128:1

Psalm 128 reminds God's people of the blessings of family life. (See also Psalm 127; June 10.)

One of the greatest blessings we have is our family. A happy marriage is worth more than any fortune; a united family is worth more than any wealth. A family that honors God is a valuable testimony to the richness of God's blessing in life.

A family dedicated to serving the Lord in all things is a family that knows happiness. The husband who fears the Lord and wants to live God's way works with all his energy for a safe and godly home for his family members. He loves his wife "just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25); he is united to and faithful to his wife, who is "like a fruitful vine." They respect and care for one another. And if they are blessed with

children, their children are "like olive shoots," fruitful in bringing more blessing into their lives. Godly parents teach their children in the ways of the Lord so that they may be blessed all the days of their lives. And if God wills it, they may live to see their children's children, receiving even more blessing and joy from God's hand.

With blessing the Lord brings prosperity, peace, and joy to families who seek to honor him. When you honor God in your home, you will always have him as an ally.

Father, bless our homes and families with your love. Give us unity, joy, fidelity, forgiveness, and prosperity—that we may share with others and help them to know you too. In Christ, Amen.

HAPPINESS IN RETURNING TO THE FATHER

"This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." So they began to celebrate. —Luke 15:24

Jesus' parable of the lost son is one of the most moving stories in the Bible. It is about a young man who felt dissatisfied in his father's house. He thought he could find happiness far away from his family home. So one day he asked for his share of the family inheritance and left.

At first, while he had money, the young man had plenty of friends and lots of fun. He spent everything he had on riotous living. But then hunger came, and he knew what it meant to be in need. He found work taking care of pigs. The happiness he had thought he would find was just a mirage.

The lost son had been happy in his father's house but didn't know it. Now he was consciously unhappy, so he decided to return home and ask his father for forgiveness.

The lost son was willing to be received only as a servant. But when he returned home, he was surprised. His father was waiting for him and ran to meet him. His father hugged him, kissed him, and threw a party for him, saying, "Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine . . . was lost and is found."

Jesus said there is rejoicing in heaven when a sinner repents and returns to God (Luke 15:7, 10). In the same way, let's celebrate when anyone among us does the same!

Dear God, thank you for making us part of your family, and for sending Jesus so that we can return to you. May we also share in rejoicing whenever another child returns to share in your happiness. In Jesus, Amen.

THE HAPPINESS OF ABUNDANT LIFE

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." —John 10:10

In our reading today Jesus explains that he is our shepherd, "the good shepherd" who "lays down his life for the sheep."

Jesus also says that the purpose of his coming into the world is to give us life in abundance. Unlike the thief, who comes to steal, kill, and destroy the sheep, Jesus came so that we can experience permanent joy, lasting peace, and eternal happiness.

Once, during a feast in Jerusalem, Jesus stood up and declared, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them" (John 7:37-38).

True happiness is in knowing Jesus by experiencing him and enjoying him. This is not just a theoretical or intellectual knowledge. Jesus is the water

of life. We need to drink this water. Whoever drinks this water will never be thirsty again.

Jesus quenches our existential thirst, our hunger for meaning. Although we may feel like an insignificant speck in the vast universe, Jesus became human, just like us. He, more than anyone, values his creation and gives us an unmatched gift: abundant life.

Lord Jesus, anyone who loves you lacks nothing. You have promised us abundant life. Guide us each day to live fully for you, with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Thank you for coming to save us, and help us to share your love with everyone. In your name we pray. Amen.

THE HAPPINESS OF SUFFERING

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." —Matthew 5:10

Let's focus again today on Jesus' statements of blessing (beatitudes) in Matthew 5. These statements have been a source of encouragement for believers struggling with adversity, harassment, and oppression. These words may not seem so attractive today, however, when success and self-sufficiency are so highly valued. Our Scripture reading today, especially, might cause us to wonder what happiness there can be in facing persecution because of Jesus.

Suffering for our own mistakes tends to be a source of shame. But to suffer for the sake of righteousness (because we are followers of Jesus) is a cause for joy in the Lord. The Lord's prophets and apostles who lived before us suffered many kinds of humiliations for the sake of righteousness and justice—just because they were

trying to live God's way. Jesus, likewise, was persecuted for doing good and teaching about the kingdom of God.

The apostle Paul says that "everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). So we can expect to face some kind of suffering as Jesus' followers. But, as Paul also teaches, "our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18). The happiness we enjoy now is just a prelude to our eternal happiness!

Lord, despite the difficulties we may face, fill our hearts with peace and happiness in serving you, knowing we will live with you forever! Amen.

THE HAPPINESS OF FORGIVENESS

Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.
—Psalm 32:1

Many people are plagued with guilt. They live as prisoners of sin, without peace in their souls. As a result, many people have sought refuge in false solutions, and their attempts to appease their feelings of guilt have failed miserably.

Some people try to escape this overwhelming feeling by going on adventures. Others try to numb themselves with alcohol or drugs, creating even deeper pain. Some try to calm their anguish with self-help philosophies and mystical experiences. But no ritual or exercise can alleviate a guilty conscience.

Only the blood of Jesus can blot out our sins and free us from the guilt of our wrongdoing. Only Jesus can break the bars of our prison and break our chains. Only Jesus can offer us true forgiveness and eternal happiness. Seeking forgiveness from another source

is like trying to find water in a dried-up well.

The psalmist learned similarly that while he kept silent (not seeking God's forgiveness), his "bones wasted away" and his "strength was sapped as in the heat of summer." Only when he opened his heart to God and acknowledged his sin did he find healing for the affliction of his soul. For he found that God "forgave the guilt of [his] sin."

Hallelujah!

Because of your mercies, O Lord, we are not consumed. Your forgiveness cancels the power of guilt and sin. We praise you, Lord, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

HAPPINESS IN HAVING THE LORD

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

—Psalm 23:4

Some situations in our lives can make us fearful, like a dark valley where danger lurks. Maybe we've received a surprising medical report or a layoff notice. Maybe we've lost a dear loved one. Maybe our marriage is falling apart. Or it could be any number of hard situations at once.

What a blessing it is to have the Lord at our side in such times!

The psalmist did not fear because he knew the Lord was with him, always caring for him like a good shepherd. He had enjoyed good and peaceful times in God's presence, when all seemed to go well. And he trusted that the good shepherd would not abandon him in difficult times.

We can trust that God will never abandon us because his promise is not only to be with

us here in this life but for all eternity.

Jesus' sheep are happy because he is the good shepherd who has laid down his life for them and will never let them go (John 10:11-18, 27-30). He supplies all of their needs. He protects them from evil. Even in the darkest valleys of life, Jesus' sheep need not fear because their shepherd has defeated death. Jesus has already taken away the sting of death—and now he offers us, free of charge, through faith, a happy and eternal life!

Lord, in you I have peace at all times, because you are always with me. The certainty of your presence assures me that I am safe in your omnipotent care. Thank you, Lord. Amen.

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