



Sept/Oct 2020

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew

**DYING  
TO LIVE**

**ALSO: JACOB: CHANGED BY GOD'S GRACE**

Dear Friends:

In Michigan, where I live, we sometimes joke that we have only two seasons: winter and construction, a cynical reference to our state's much-needed roadwork.

In our September meditations, Syd Hielema notes that all of us who follow Jesus are "under construction." In other words, although Jesus has redeemed us, we all have a long way to go in learning to live for him. And this process of learning to live for Jesus ultimately means daily "dying" to ourselves. For all of us, this is a slow, oftentimes painful, lifelong process of putting aside our will, our desires, our aspirations, and our goals and learning to seek God's will first and the coming of his kingdom in our lives and in this world.

In October, Joel Vande Werken follows up that theme with a series on the life and struggles of the patriarch Jacob, whom God renamed *Israel*. For many of us, Jacob is something of a confounding "hero." He can be deceitful. He lies. He cheats. He runs away. He whines and feels sorry for himself. Yet, by the end of Jacob's life, we can see that God's grace has transformed him.

So these meditations remind and assure us that although we struggle with faults and weaknesses, God, through the grace of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, can and will transform and sanctify us.

I pray that each of you will be refreshed, refocused, and renewed as you meditate on 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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**“Dying to Live”  
Syd Hielema**



**“Jacob: Changed by  
God’s Grace”  
Joel Vande Werken**

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**ReFrame**  
Media

# september

## Dying to Live

Syd Hielema

Jesus taught that real life is found in giving up our own selfish desires and attitudes so that God can grow his life in us. This is often called *dying to self* so that we can really live as God, our Creator, intends us to.

Jesus declared, "Whoever loses their life for me will find it" (Matthew 16:25), and the apostle Paul echoes this in his powerful testimony: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).

Imagine beginning every day with a prayer like this: "Lord, show me how you are calling me to die today so that you can live more fully in and through me." Does that seem strange? Well, it does go against our human nature stuck in sin, but in God's strength we can give up that old way of life and take on a new life, rooted fully in Jesus Christ, so that we can really live.

My prayer is that this month the Lord will guide you into the joy and freedom of Jesus' kind of living by "dying to live."

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## DYING TO LIVE

*“Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.”*  
—Matthew 16:25

Have you ever had a dentist do a root canal on one of your teeth? I’ve learned a few things from having three root canals done. With a tiny drill the dentist cleans out all the toxins in an infected tooth, right down to the roots. And then the dentist refills all the drilled-out areas to restore the tooth to pain-free wholeness.

The life of Christian discipleship aims to follow that pattern every day. To surrender to Jesus is to “die to live,” giving over to him our sin, our wounds, and all our baggage so that he may refill us with new life through the Holy Spirit. It’s much more complex than a root canal, and the results are literally life-changing.

The call to find our lives by losing them is a bit hard to grasp, though. This doesn’t come naturally to us. But as we reflect on this theme this month,

we will see that dying to live is a journey of joy, gratitude, and grace.

In a talk she gave on worship, author Marva Dawn said, “Imagine if every believer prayed before a worship service, ‘Lord, please use this worship to show me again how to die for you.’”

I did try to imagine it, and I pictured communities in which the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, self-control, and more—could grow in abundance as toxins were cleaned out. That’s the fruit of a community that is dying to live.

Jesus, thank you for inviting me into full life with you. Help me to see what you need to clean out as I live with you. Amen.

## CLOTHED WITH CHRIST

*As God's chosen people . . . clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. —Colossians 3:12*

A friend told me that when she wakes up feeling down, she will put on some of her best clothes. That can help her feel like celebrating, she says, and it will often improve her day.

The Bible describes how being made new in Christ is like putting on new and special clothing. In Revelation 7:13-14 we read that God's people are given white robes to wear, washed in the blood of the Lamb. Galatians 3:27 says that all who are baptized have been clothed with Christ.

In Colossians we are encouraged to clothe ourselves with "compassion, humility, kindness, gentleness and patience." These qualities are like all the pieces in a matching set of clothes. Did you notice that Paul names these articles of clothing *after* giving us a long list of vices that need to die, such as sexual immorality, lust,

evil desires, greed, anger, rage, malice, and filthy language? He's saying, in effect, "Get rid of your old, dirty, smelly clothes so that Jesus can give you the clothing of life." Then "over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."

And what's the result of this change of clothing? "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." When we're dying to live, Jesus shines through us.

What are some things that should die in *you* today? And which articles of clothing will you put on, in Christ?

Jesus, thank you for clothing me with yourself. Help me to live like you. Amen.

## CHRIST FORMED IN YOU

*He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*  
—Philippians 1:6

Are you a person who sees a half glass of water as half full—or half empty? These are two very different ways of looking at life.

For much of my life, I saw God as checking me out in a half-empty-glass sort of way. I had so many character flaws. Fear often paralyzed me from doing the right thing. If folks knew what really went on in my heart and mind—well, it would be “game over” for me. It seemed that the best survival strategy was to hide my heart and pretend I was doing great.

But God sees us as a glass half full. He has begun a good work in us! Wow, there’s so much to be thankful for! Christ is being formed in us. Even if you are not a Christ-follower, the fact that you are reading this is part of a good work that God is beginning in you! The good work that God has begun in you is

like a launchpad filled with hope, commitment, gratitude, and courage to keep on being formed in Christ.

Think of yourself as being “under construction.” God is doing good things in you. And God has many more good things that he will do.

So in his strength let us all “run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Thank you, Lord, for the good work you have begun in me. Continue your work as I seek to run the race you have marked out for me. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

## JUGLONE

*"Others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life . . . choke the word. . . ." —Mark 4:18-19*

When we bought our current home, we started a garden in the backyard. We cut some grass out of the lawn, added fertilizer and other nutrients, turned over the soil, and planted seeds. Though we had done some gardening before, this garden performed terribly.

We tried again the next year, but it didn't do any better. One day a horticulturalist friend came to visit, and he observed, "You have a walnut grove behind your home. I bet nothing grows in your garden." So we learned a difficult lesson: walnut trees inject a chemical called juglone into the soil, and that kills the growth of many other plants, including vegetables. Determined to keep trying with our garden, though, we eventually discovered that a raised bed high off the ground works well in our yard.

Juglone helps me understand Jesus' parable of the four soils. Our hearts are like gardens that need tending, but the soil of our hearts can be hardened or filled with thorns, rocks, and even toxins like juglone. We all have toxins in our lives that can prevent spiritual fruit from growing. Wounds from an old conflict or the effects of a bad decision can run deep, and difficult relationships can seem impossible to sort out.

Jesus doesn't wave a magic wand and clear away all the struggles we have in life. But his grace is enough to help us heal and grow. He says, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Lord, tend the soils of my heart so that I can bear fruit that shares the beauty of your heart. Amen.

## CLENCHED HEARTS

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*  
—Matthew 5:3

Make your hand into a fist, clenching it tight. Now imagine that your heart is like that: clenched, closed, so tense and tight that it almost hurts—but in a strange way that tightness feels safer than letting anyone in to hurt you.

Listen as Jesus begins a powerful sermon, declaring, "Blessed are the poor in spirit. . . ." It's as if he's saying, "Of course your heart wants to clench up. It feels inadequate; it is wounded and weary; it feels threatened, like it's under attack. It wants to protect itself."

But he knows that a clenched heart might also shut out the love of God. So Jesus invites us to open our hearts, just as they are, wounded and weary. It's as if he is saying, "Don't pretend; be real; be vulnerable. You are poor in spirit, but you want to hide that from people around you, so you clench your heart.

Let it go! Being poor in spirit is not something to hide; it's a way to be blessed!"

Years ago a friend told me that on her first day of college, she met her roommate and quickly discovered that this person was tough, hard to get to know, and actually a bit scary. She tiptoed around her for a couple of weeks. Then one day she came back from class and found her roommate weeping. After a hug, they talked things through and found a new way to handle dorm life together. That's an example of a "dying to live" blessing that can come from being open to one another.

Lord, thank you for inviting me to come to you as I am. Help me to open my heart to others—and to show your love. Amen.

## TEARS AND GENTLE KINDNESS

*"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.  
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."*

—Matthew 5:4-5

Mourning is a blessing? Meekness is a blessing? Wouldn't life be happier if we could avoid mourning and meekness? Well, no. Two of the strongest toxins in our hearts are the urge to pass judgment on others and the drive to control others.

Jesus invites us to put those toxins to death through mourning and being meek. Do you see brokenness, struggle, and messiness in people's lives? Does that activate your judgment trigger? Try mourning instead, says Jesus; sit by someone who is hurting, and weep with them. Judgment isolates and excludes. Mourning together can build a deep, spiritual bond. "Mourn with those who mourn" (Romans 12:15). If you can recall a time when someone wept with you, you know it was a beautiful gift.

Do you see someone acting in ways that don't fit your agenda,

and do you feel a desire to control them? Let it go, says Jesus; walk with them in a way that is meek: gentle, patient, and kind.

Years ago I met a woman consumed with anger for God and his people. One night she surrendered her life to Christ, and I asked her the next day what had happened. "Someone I had not met before pulled my entire life story out of me," she said, "And when I was done, I began to weep." That person wept with her and invited her to ask Jesus into her heart.

That's the power of tears shed in meekness. What a blessing!

Lord, thank you for the gifts of shared tears and meekness. Cleanse me of sinful anger and power-hungers, that I may help to bless others. Amen.

## MEEKNESS IN ACTION

*“Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” . . . “Neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”* —John 8:7, 11

At first this story appears to have three simple steps. The religious leaders try to trap Jesus as they publicly shame a woman caught in adultery. But instead of falling for their trap, he silences them, and they leave. And then he forgives the woman.

But, looking deeper, we can see there is a lot more going on. This is complex. We can even say that this story shows how meekness—that is, gentle, firm strength—can lead people to change their actions.

The religious leaders are playing power games. They are exercising spiritual abuse first by shaming the woman and then by trying to undermine the credibility of Jesus. Jesus, recognizing their horrific abuse of spiritual power, avoids their trap by ignoring them at first.

Then, as they keep badgering, he responds, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone.” It’s as if he is saying, “Your power abuse prevents you from receiving God’s grace. Confess your sin, surrender that godless power, and you can find life.”

Then he calls the woman to die to her sin as well, and to be invited into true life.

The meek, life-transforming Savior invites everyone to die and truly live! Who could have known that meekness could be so radically renewing?

Lord, open our eyes to reject spiritual abuse and shaming that pretends to be holy, so that your true life will shape and guide all we do. Amen.

## DESIRING THE KINGDOM

*"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."*  
—Matthew 5:6

How many desires have you had in the past 24 hours?

Here's a handful of mine: I've desired a delicious meal, a restful sleep, a win for my favorite hockey team (and they won!), a kind response to an email I sent about a stressful situation, a safe trip for a loved one. And there are more—in fact, I've probably had hundreds of desires in the past 24 hours.

In the "Blessed are . . ." statement we are looking at today, Jesus invites us to examine our desires and hold them up to his standard. Do our desires align with hungering and thirsting for righteousness?

Years ago, I was with some people at church discussing the second coming of Jesus. And they were surprised when I blurted out, "I don't know if I want Jesus to come back yet. I want to see my infant daugh-

ter grow up. I want to fix up the 100-year-old house we bought. I have so many plans I want to carry out." The room became very quiet. Then our pastor said gently, "Syd, do you want to see a world where there is no more cancer, or hunger, or crime, or war?" "Yes, I do," I said sheepishly. "Then," he replied, "you want Jesus to come back. Your desires are what he also desires."

God can help us sort out our desires that might not fit with seeking righteousness, and he can give us a deep passion for the desires that align with his heart. His wisdom is available to us always (James 1:5), and he is always with us to guide us.

Lord, by your wisdom and power, help us align our desires to match the longings of your heart. Amen.

## GOD AT THE CENTER

*Those who make [idols] will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.*  
—Psalm 115:8

I generally have several “to do” lists, and each one deals with a different area of my life. There’s a “work” list, a “home maintenance” list, a “church” list, and so on. I find these lists helpful for managing my life. But I’ve also found that these lists can easily distort not only my life but also *me*.

The psalmist says that when we set up idols in our lives, we become like them. An idol can be anything in our lives that becomes more important to us than God is (or should be).

When my lists become too important, I see everything and every person in my world as a task that needs to be crossed off the list. That really distorts the meaning of loving God and my neighbor and caring for people in need. If all they are is an item on my list, I am not loving or caring for them at all. And just as lists are written on

two-dimensional sheets of paper, I begin to become a shallow, two-dimensional person.

There are hundreds of “things” that call out to us, saying, “Look! Pay attention to me! I’ll make you happy.” But they are all lying. Money and possessions turn our hearts toward “cold, hard cash.” Sexual pursuits reduce people and relationships to fleeting pleasures. Following all the “right” rules makes us judgmental slaves to a law when God wants us to have spiritual freedom.

We can find true, full life when God alone is at the center.

Lord, help me see the idols and distortions in my life, and grant me the grace and wisdom to cast them aside so that only you are at the center of my life. Amen.

## REFRESHING SHEPHERD

*He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.*  
—Psalm 23:2-3

Years ago on a retreat, I was instructed to spend three hours praying Psalm 23. My anxious heart panicked. But after getting over the initial shock, I spent three hours rediscovering the power of grace in this precious psalm.

I realized that I had always seen God as a taskmaster, as if his main goal was to make sure I was doing enough for him. Instead, Psalm 23 declares that the Lord is my *shepherd*—and the shepherd's desire is to *refresh my soul!*

There are two powerful blessings in this refreshing.

First, the shepherd knows that life beats up my soul. Life is often confusing. I have to make all kinds of decisions. I try to love people, and I mess up. I make plans, and they often fall apart. Every day I deal with situations that leave me feeling

anxious, weary, and discouraged. My soul needs constant refreshing, and the shepherd knows this so well that he walks right alongside me.

Second, the shepherd knows I need green pastures and quiet waters. The beauty here is that these pastures and waters can be different for all of us! Your green pastures and quiet waters may be different from mine. But the shepherd knows you better than you know yourself, and he will lead you to the right places for refreshment.

When I surrender to his leading, God takes me to places where weary exhaustion begins to die, and life is refreshed.

Shepherd of life, help me see the green pastures and quiet waters you are leading me to, and restore my soul. Amen.

## TENDER MERCY, PURE HEART

*“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” —Matthew 5:7-8*

I find it hard to receive mercy. I beat myself up; I thank God for forgiving me, but I have trouble forgiving myself. I have learned, though, that Jesus invites me into the mercy circle: “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”

Jesus is *not* saying that receiving mercy is a reward for being merciful. Rather, he is teaching us that receiving mercy becomes easier when we are merciful. The acts of receiving and showing mercy strengthen each other. As I share mercy, my own ability to receive mercy and also forgive myself become stronger.

Mercy is like a powerful detergent that purifies our hearts. And as the heart is purified, the eyes learn a new way of seeing. They come to see the presence of God in all kinds of unexpected places. The pure

in heart “will see God,” Jesus declares.

With our hands open to receive mercy and a purified heart that refocuses our eyes, we grow to see all the people around us with God’s mercy, and we begin to appreciate how much he loves them, cares for them, and wants full life for them—for all of us!

Decades ago Christian singer Noel Paul Stookey (formerly of Peter, Paul, and Mary) recorded a gentle song called “Tender hands, softest eyes.” It captures some parts of Jesus’ teaching here beautifully. Tender hands and soft eyes become instruments of blessing that transmit the grace of God.

Lord, free me to receive your mercy, and purify my heart to share your grace everywhere. Amen.

## CONTAGIOUS FORGIVENESS

*"If you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."*

—Matthew 6:14-15

Jesus' teaching here at the end of the Lord's Prayer might be confusing. It almost sounds as if we have to earn God's forgiveness by forgiving others. But we also know that through faith in Jesus, we are already forgiven by God (Acts 2:38; Romans 3-8). So we need a different kind of thinking here.

Think of an old kitchen sponge that hasn't been used for a long time. When you put it under the tap, the water runs right over the sponge. But if you set the sponge in a bucket of water for a few minutes, it softens and becomes usable again.

Our hearts can be like that too. When we hold onto resentments and bitterness, nursing our anger, we can become as hard as a rock, and God's grace for us will be like water running over a rock. It doesn't soak in.

But when we are open to forgiving others, we become soft like a moistened sponge. The Lord's deep grace soaks in and saturates our hearts, and we become available to share his grace. Just as a wet sponge moistens other things when it touches them, we can share grace, helping to wipe others' dirt away as we forgive others. As Colossians 3:13 puts it, "Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

Dying to our accumulated resentment, anger, and bitterness softens our hearts to receive God's amazing grace and to share it freely with others.

Soak my heart, Lord, in the depths of your abundant grace and mercy, that I may overflow with grace and mercy for others. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

## PEACEMAKING

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

The concept of peace here is based on the meaning of the Hebrew word *shalom*. Shalom refers to a way of life in which justice, peace, goodness, righteousness, and flourishing abound for all people. This is life as God intends it to be, in which everyone lives in harmony with God and with their neighbors.

Jesus came to bring and restore us to peace with God (John 16:33; Romans 5:1). And now we are invited to be peacemakers together with Jesus. Just as he is the Son of God, so we become children of God as we join in his mission of peacemaking.

Shalom-making involves everything we do—in our work and play, in the way we handle our finances, in all our relationships with family, friends, and neighbors. Shalom guides us to build unity across racial differences, break down barriers

that keep people in poverty, call for legislation that helps life to flourish, and point to God's way of living that brings full life for all, including care for God's creation.

Christian worship often closes with a blessing of peace on the people who are gathered, so that they may go out to share God's peace with others (Numbers 6:24-26):

"The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace."

Renew me, O Lord, with your peace that surpasses understanding, that I may be a peacemaker in all I do, following Jesus' example. For his sake, Amen.

## BLESSINGS IN PERSECUTION?

*The apostles left . . . rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name [of Jesus].*

—Acts 5:41

When we read this story, we might wonder, How could Jesus' followers in the early church find joy in being persecuted for their faith? And what kinds of persecution do Christians face in our world today?

As we can imagine, persecution was not something that Jesus' followers wanted. But because they understood that Jesus is God and wants all of us to have full life forever with him, they were willing to stand against authorities who taught otherwise, even if that meant they would be persecuted and perhaps even executed for having faith in Jesus.

In some parts of the world today, Christians still face severe persecution and even death for their faith. And in other societies, where religious freedoms are allowed (as in North America), there can be subtle

pressures and persecution as well for people who seek to live for Jesus.

If we seek to love everyone around us in Jesus' name, if we mourn over brokenness, and we hunger and thirst for righteousness, and we aim to share God's peace/shalom in every way, we are not going to fit in with the mainstream of society where we live. Persecution can arise wherever our values and lifestyle focus on Christ and contradict the mainstream. But in Jesus' name we are encouraged to keep doing good so that others will see it and praise our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16). Results like these brought Jesus' followers joy, and we can experience that too.

Lord, help us to honor you in all we do, bringing praise to your name. Amen.

## LOVING OUR ENEMIES

*“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.”*

—Matthew 5:44-45

My mother was a teenager during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands (1940-45). A girl next door died when a bomb hit her home. A Jewish family with young children across the street were taken away, and they all died in the Holocaust.

At 16, my mother was often sent out on a bike to get milk at a farm outside their city. On one trip, she was stopped by a German soldier at a checkpoint, and she realized she was looking into the eyes of a scared 16-year-old boy forced into service. She said, “When I saw how young and how scared he was, I learned for the first time in my life just a little of what it means to love your enemies.”

Though I have never had to live in those kinds of conditions, I have experienced hating others and wishing them ill,

and I’ve struggled with Jesus’ command to love my enemies.

I’ve noticed that when I hate others, I easily feel proud and self-righteous. I find myself thinking, “They have done or said these horrible things, and I would never do that. They are inferior.” I’ve also learned that this kind of attitude undermines all of Jesus’ teaching about loving God and neighbor.

Recognizing the ugliness of my own attitude doesn’t automatically lead me to love my enemies, but it begins to put that sinfulness to death. I begin to realize that I too am sinful and in need of forgiveness.

Lord, when any hatred for others lives in me, please forgive me and help me to care about their souls, loving them as you do. Amen.

## SERVING GOD FIRST

*When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind." —Mark 3:21*

Perhaps you have had a time when it felt like no one in the world understood what you were going through or why you were doing something.

That also happened to Jesus, and in this situation his family "went to take charge of him." They must have thought Jesus was no longer able to live on his own—and they might have been embarrassed by him and for him. They wanted to take him home, perhaps to keep him protected and away from the public eye.

Mark tells us that when Jesus' family arrived at the place where he was teaching, they couldn't get into the house, so they sent a message inside to say they were looking for him. And Jesus' response was probably confusing, at least at first: "Who are my mother and brothers? . . . Whoever does

God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

I try to imagine Jesus' mother, Mary, processing this event. Before Jesus was born, an angel had said that this child would be the Savior, the Son of God (Luke 1:31-35). Her heart must have been wrenched!

Here again we see the kind of living that Jesus calls us to. He is focused on the will of God the Father. His family doesn't understand, so they think he is out of his mind. In fact, *they* are the confused ones; they have replaced the Father's will with their own wills. But like Jesus, we are called to serve God first, even when others think we are out of our minds.

Lord, help us to know your will for our lives, and grant us the courage to live for you. Amen.

## LIGHTING A CANDLE

*"Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."* —Matthew 5:14

Have you ever noticed that when you turn on a powerful light in a bright, sunlit room, you hardly notice that the light is on? But when you light a tiny candle in a dark room at night, you can see so much more than you could before. Light makes a difference according to when and where it is used.

My father-in-law was a pastor who continued ministering to others until the final days of his life. On the wall of his room he posted a simple proverb that summarized his life and legacy: "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness."

Everywhere we turn in today's world, we can see and hear loud voices cursing the darkness. Anger and accusation are commonly accepted ways of speaking out, often with half-truths and even blatant lies.

What are Christ-followers to do in such a time? We are

called to light candles: offering words of encouragement; living out Jesus' kind of meekness when manipulation and deception are often used to wield power godlessly; working to help others, advocating for them openly as well as serving quietly behind the scenes.

Last year I entered semi-retirement, and I am amazed to find so many retired people (and younger ones too!) sharing light. They are teaching refugees, tutoring kids, mentoring teens, working with street people. An 85-year-old woman, for example, leads a group of young, single moms and she said to me, "As long as I have a pulse, I have a purpose."

Jesus, light of the world, let your light shine through us to break the hold of darkness. Amen.

## QUIET, POWERFUL KINGDOM WORK

*"You are the salt of the earth."*

—Matthew 5:13

Salt and yeast have a number of things in common. Both come in tiny granules and are used for enhancing food. By the time the food is eaten, they have pretty much become invisible, but the contributions they make are very noticeable. Yeast works well to make dough rise when you are baking bread, and salt is both a seasoning and a preservative.

Here Jesus is teaching us about quiet, behind-the-scenes work in the kingdom of God that can make a big difference in people's lives.

I met a nurse who worked in a large city hospital. She was a fairly shy person who didn't say much but loved her work, and she served with dedication and discipline. She told me that as she came off her shift one night at 11 p.m., a colleague said, "I realized tonight that whenever I'm on the same

shift as you, the work seems to go better. That surprised me because often I hardly even notice you are there." To Jesus, though, that's not surprising. When we live out our calling to be salt and yeast, we leave noticeable blessings behind.

A well-to-do friend asked me to quietly pass along a sum of his money to a struggling family in our church. They were greatly relieved and asked for the donor's name so that they could say thanks. I urged them simply to thank God for the love and care they received.

Dying to the desire to be noticed can leave behind powerful, unforgettable blessings.

Thank you, Lord, for quiet, powerful kingdom work. May we serve you faithfully for Jesus' sake. Amen.

## JUSTICE OR JUST US?

*“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations.”*  
—Isaiah 42:1

Think about our world for a moment. Who could possibly bring justice to the nations?

Isaiah 42 speaks of this person but doesn't say who it is. Matthew 12:15-21, though, shows that Jesus is the one described here. He is the one who brings justice. In the Bible, seeking justice is the same as peacemaking (see Sept. 13). Shalom, the state in which everything in life goes the way that God intends, is a state of total justice.

Seeking justice is central to understanding Jesus. In his teaching and healing work, Jesus ministered to people who were sick, poor, foreigners, and outcasts. He overturned unjust social structures—between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the weak, the healthy and the sick, and more.

Micah 6:8 puts it this way: “What does the LORD require

of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

Jesus' followers did the same. Roman rulers observed Christians feeding the hungry and caring for the sick during epidemics, and declared, “See how they love one another!” Through the centuries, communities of Jesus' followers have built schools and hospitals, abolished slavery, improved health care, reformed criminal-justice systems, and much, much more.

Justice means dying to “just us” so that everyone may live more fully.

Lord Jesus, help us to serve you faithfully today, bringing justice in your world—at home, in our communities, and beyond. Amen.

## LOVE AND NOT KNOWING

*Now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.*  
—1 Corinthians 13:12

This chapter of the Bible has often been read at weddings. Its poetic description of love is so universal that people everywhere are encouraged and strengthened by its message.

The word for “love” in this chapter is the Greek word *agape*, which describes the deepest love we can imagine. This is pure, unconditional love, for which we would give up our life to save another. This kind of love is the truest expression of “dying to live.”

The apostle Paul explains here that love is more important than all the other things we can do. And if we do anything without love, it means nothing.

He also talks about knowing only “in part” and about someday knowing “fully.” In other words, there’s a lot we don’t know yet.

What does not knowing have to do with love? Two thoughts come to mind: (1) the older I get, the more I realize how much I don’t know; and (2) the more certain I am of something, the freer I feel to judge others who don’t have the same certainty. The problem with that, of course, is that the freer I feel to judge, the less loving I become.

An 80-year-old woman said to me, “For most of my life I wanted to be right. Now I’ve finally realized that being loving is much more important.”

Lord, you know all things. We don’t. Help us to trust you to know what’s best, and to share your love with everyone for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

## THE QUIET PEACEMAKER

*"He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets."*

—Isaiah 42:2

One of the first impulses that a young toddler learns is to react with anger to a perceived injustice. "Not fair!" the child will yell, "That's mine!" After attempting to calm down the frustrated child, the parent will often say, "You need to share. You've played with that for a long time. Now let someone else have a turn."

The parent is giving the child a lesson in dying to live, giving something up in order to live life to the full. But that's not all. The child is also being taught that it's easy to react to a perceived wrong with an angry tantrum, but it's wiser to navigate life as one who does not "shout or cry out."

This passage in Isaiah is describing the wisdom of the quietness of Jesus' ministry.

In the past several years, the world seems to have become

a noisier, angrier place. The anonymity of social media, increasing anxiety about a world whose problems seem out of control, and a great deal of changes in shared values have combined to generate a lot of heat and not much light. A few years ago I wrote a gentle op-ed for a newspaper, describing what it meant for me to be a Christ-follower today, and the hatred that followed in online comments was overwhelming.

That kind of response makes me want to shout, but when I remember the attitude of Jesus described here in Isaiah, I realize that that urge needs to die. It's better to act in a way that leads to restoring life.

Quiet the noise inside me,  
Lord, that I may follow  
you with the day-to-day  
faithfulness of your Son,  
the Servant. Amen.

## COMMUNITY OF BRUISED REEDS

*"A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. . . ."*  
—Matthew 12:20

A church pastor shared what he had learned about the community he preached to every Sunday. He had learned that appearances can be deceiving.

The smiling woman in the sixth row was terrified that the medical tests she had last week would show that she had cancer. The father and son sitting expressionless behind her had argued on the way to church, and both were still fuming. The elderly widower toward the back worried that he would not have money for food that week. A woman singing heartily in the third row was no longer sure she believed the words she was singing.

When I was younger, I thought the world had two kinds of people: normal ones and hurting ones—bruised reeds. Later a counselor taught me that there are no normal people.

Churches are communities of bruised reeds and smoldering wicks. Often there are folks in churches who pretend to "have it all together," but no one's life is free of trouble and struggle.

Yet Jesus, the Servant, gives us hope! "In this world you will have trouble," he says, "But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Some of my favorite times in church have been celebrations of communion, when I have seen in people's eyes a longing for the day when Jesus will return and "wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. . . ." (Revelation 21:4). Lord, come quickly!

Lord, we are bruised reeds, smoldering wicks. Thank you for tending us with your care and grace. Amen.

## STICK-TO-ITIVENESS

*He will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth.*  
—Isaiah 42:4

We hear a lot about burnout these days in the service professions: social workers, teachers, police officers, pastors, medical workers, and more. When your work focuses on serving people in distress, it's difficult not to become distressed too. It can be unsettling to pour your heart and soul into helping others, and in the end to see little improvement and receive little gratitude.

With this in mind, we realize that Jesus is profoundly remarkable: "In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth."

Are you faltering or discouraged, or are you supporting someone who is? You don't need to be a service professional to experience burnout. Families often face wearying times. And working to love people in our communities

who are grieving, dealing with broken relationships, or experiencing mental health struggles takes a toll on everyone. As our lifespans get longer and longer, more and more people are also serving as caregivers for elderly parents.

You and I are not Jesus; rather, we are called to be his followers. Because he does not falter or become discouraged, we can give ourselves permission to feel discouraged. And we can surrender our discouragement to him; we can let that part of us die too, and we can trust that at the right time (even a long time from now) we will be replenished and able to continue serving as his followers again.

Dear Jesus, when I am discouraged, fix my eyes on you and grant me the grace to be restored. Amen.

## SIGNS OF HOPE

*"The Spirit of the Lord . . . has anointed me to proclaim good news . . . and . . . the year of the Lord's favor." —Luke 4:18-19*

Sometimes I worship with a congregation in a maximum security prison. The good news of God's grace moves powerfully and deep in that congregation. The worship often includes testimonies of changed lives. The preaching hits straight to the heart, mixing humor with seriousness. The singing is passionate, even boisterous, led by the musically skilled jailhouse band. Worshipers from every race come together in unity to pray, praise, and be ministered to.

These verses from Luke 4 remind me of that community. And while many of the worshipers there have life sentences, as I think about Jesus' words "to proclaim freedom for the prisoners," I realize that these worshipers are truly free! Their eyes shine with gratitude, their voices let loose in praise, their hands reach out to one

another in tangible expressions of the communion of saints.

Every worship service ends with the community forming a large circle, holding hands, and singing, "My friends, may you grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior. . . . To God be the glory. . . ."

Pondering why the worship blessings there are so rich, I am drawn to the phrase "proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." I realize how easily I like worship to match "my favor." And I have learned that the saints in that prison are my role models for worship, for living out Jesus' declaration of free, new life. Thank you, brothers!

Jesus, thank you for proclaiming the Lord's favor, and for the free, new life it brings. Amen.

## PARTNERED WITH JESUS

*“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me . . . and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*  
—Matthew 11:28-30

Jesus’ invitation to be yoked with him may seem puzzling. A yoke pairs two oxen side by side so that they can pull together to get hard work done. That raises a couple of questions: (1) How can we possibly fit into a yoke designed to fit Jesus? and (2) What does this work have to do with “rest,” being “easy,” and a “burden [that] is light?” What kind of invitation calls people who are “weary and burdened” and offers them a yoke that puts them to work?

Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of this passage in *The Message* may help: “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay

anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

The yoke fits easily on us, because it fits Jesus perfectly, and he’s shaping us to become like him. Inside the “unforced rhythms of grace,” even the line between work and rest is blurred.

Are you weary? Take on the partner-yoke and let the one who is “gentle and humble in heart” be your yoke-teacher.

Dear Jesus, yes, I am weary. Place your grace-shaped yoke on me, that I may find rest in working alongside you. Amen.

## GROWING UP TO BECOME A CHILD

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

—Matthew 18:3

What does Jesus mean by saying we need to “change and become like little children”? One clue we have here is that Jesus is responding to the question “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And he replies, “Whoever takes the *lowly position* of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

In the books about Jesus and his disciples (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), we find that the disciples often argued over which of them was greatest; they seem to have been a competitive group. And they were thinking of greatness in terms of leadership, knowledge, power, influence, and other things.

So Jesus is telling his disciples that they need to change their attitudes about greatness and become lowly and humble like little children. Jesus’ followers

need to die to their selfish ambitions and realize that, just as little children depend on parents and caregivers, we are all totally dependent on God for all our needs and future living.

Here’s another thought. A man in his sixties said, “Last week my four-year-old grandson said he wanted to be a firefighter when he grew up. I replied, ‘And when I grow up, I want to be a four-year-old boy.’ My grandson stared at me with wide, wondering eyes.”

Have you looked around at God’s world with “wide, wondering eyes” lately? That’s something I long for when I hear the call to change and become like a little child.

Lord, please give us the humility and wonder of a child as we seek to live for you each day. Amen.

## WHERE GOD LIVES

*In him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*  
—Ephesians 2:22

As we wrapped up a small-group Bible study one night, I suddenly realized I had been privileged to see Jesus in the lives and hearts of each person in the room. Our little group was beautifully ordinary: a cranky retired schoolteacher, a struggling artist, a discouraged young man, others, and my wife and I, who were navigating our way with three young adopted children. Really? This is where Jesus lives?

I realized that it was in the ordinariness and even the weaknesses of our shared lives that the presence of Jesus shone through. The cranky schoolteacher could be impatient and critical, but beneath her crustiness shone a heart of gold that quietly paid for several needy students to study at a Christian graduate school. The artist stumbled with her words but spoke eloquently with her paintbrush.

The young man, who had been abused as a child, had found a safe place to weep openly about his wounds.

The fact that believers in Christ are being built together into a dwelling in which God lives is one of the great mysteries of life in Christ. The Lord of the universe, who flung countless galaxies into being, is present as his children gather in his name! Jesus stands with us in the messiness of our lives. He once said to the apostle Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). That’s the kind of power that shows up when God makes his dwelling among us.

Thank you, Lord, for dwelling among and in us with your abounding grace that is made perfect in our weaknesses. Amen.

## STUMBLING TOWARD THE KINGDOM

*Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.*  
—Philippians 2:12-13

In my first year of teaching I had a high school student who refused to hand in any work unless it was perfect. She was a bright and dedicated student, but she failed the course because so much work was not handed in. I sat down with her and her mother, and we discussed her paralyzing perfectionism. Then we made arrangements for her to retake the course as an independent study, and she passed with flying colors.

It can be easy for us to fall into a similar perfectionism in following Jesus. A voice within us can convince us that if we are not following Jesus perfectly, we are sinning. We need to die to tendencies like that because we will continue to struggle with sin even though we are already saved through Jesus' sacrifice for us. We have to trust that God will continue

to work in us even though we aren't always sure how to do what God is leading us to do.

For example, my wife and I help with a refugee resettlement ministry, and we have been excited and honored to meet amazing people from all over the world. But we work at this with some "fear and trembling" because we are not experts and we keep learning about different cultures and intercultural sensitivity. Even so, as we stumble our way into new relationships, our new friends have always received us with grace and gratitude.

Thank you, Lord, for walking with stumblers like us; steady our fear and trembling, and work through us to bring your love to others. In Jesus, Amen.

## WONDERFULLY MADE—AND REMADE

*I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made. . . . Search me, God. . . . See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.* —Psalm 139:14, 23-24

These verses from Psalm 139 remind us that while each one of us is a beautiful creation of the Lord, there are also offensive ways inside us that need to be dealt with.

After the fall into sin (described in Genesis 3), we human beings continue to live as precious works of the Creator while also needing to be redeemed from sin and brokenness. So in his great and amazing love for us, God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to pay the price for our sin and to give us new life forever with him. And now the Spirit of God lives in us, guiding us to become like Jesus. He leads us “in the way everlasting.”

The apostle Paul describes it this way: “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20), giving us one of the

clearest statements in the Bible about dying to live.

The fact that we are fearfully and wonderfully made—and remade—leads to some of the most glorious announcements in Scripture, like this one: “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2:9-10).

Thank you, Father, Son, and Spirit, for your gifts of creation and redemption. Continue to search us and to lead us in your way everlasting. Amen.

## REFINED TOWARD WHOLENESS

*We know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.*  
—1 John 3:2

The word *lavish* doesn't occur very often in the Bible, so its use here in 1 John 3 is striking: "See what great love the Father has lavished on us . . . !" This is where our salvation begins: with the overwhelming, overflowing love of God.

John then continues by contrasting what is now ("we are children of God!") with what will be: "we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." And this describes the finished project, the good work in us that God is bringing to completion (Philippians 1:6). Now we see "only a reflection as in a mirror" (1 Corinthians 13:12), but when we see Christ as he is, we shall be like him.

"All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure," says John. Hope in Jesus is the bridge, the link between the love lavished on us now and becoming like him

when he appears. This is love that is determined to bring us home. This hope is not wishful thinking; this is *active* hope, purifying hope—that is, hope that surrenders to the purifying fire of the Spirit of God as he burns away every part of us that is not pure and good.

It's a good habit to look back over each day, give it up to God, and pray some words like these:

Lord, use your purifying fire to burn away the parts of me that hurt and dishonor you and others. Help me to die to those things so that I can really live, filled with the wholeness of Jesus. Thank you, Lord, for the good work you have begun in me. Keep purifying me each day. Amen.



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