

SPRING
2021

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A DAILY GUIDE FOR
MARCH • APRIL • MAY

DEVOTIONS®



▶ **March–May 2021**

Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.

Romans 15:4

Scott Stewart, Editor

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Prophets Faithful to God's Covenant

The U.S. Postal Service has a lost-and-found in Atlanta for packages and letters that are undeliverable. It is called the Mail Recovery Center (MRC), but at one time was known as the Dead Letter Office. In 2014 the MRC received 85 million letters into its recovery system, out of more than 60 billion first-class pieces. Those undeliverable messages didn't get to the people who needed them unless the sender, intended recipient, or postal workers were able to recover the mail and get it going to its destination.

Of course, God has not relied on the U.S. Postal Service to get His very important message delivered. Rather, He has called faithful people to serve as messengers to communicate His messages.

The major prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel—quickly come to mind as God's faithful messengers. So might the minor prophets—Hosea through Malachi. These people demonstrated courage to speak and exemplify God's messages to people even when opposed and threatened by the very ones who desperately needed to hear and heed God's message.

But God was delivering His messages through people long before those Old Testament prophets. Moses, for example, was one of God's prophetic messengers. Moses spoke about God's initiative to deliver the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and take them to their land. God's message of deliverance must still go out today. Joshua served as God's spokesperson for His instructions and announcements for the conquest of the promised land and how to move into peace and security.

Kings who remained devoted to God were also faithful messengers for Him, leading the people to God—or back to God after they had strayed into worship of idols that could not save them. This is another message needed today.

Jesus is the greatest of all those who deliver God's message. He taught about the Father's love and demonstrated it by sacrificing himself as the suffering servant to secure our place in God's covenant. Because of Christ we can become children of God, members of His forever family, and have a place at the table of God's goodness.

All these messengers are recorded for us in Scripture. All messages are pertinent and desperately needed still. The record of faithful prophets provides the platform for this quarter of devotionals. The devotion authors come alongside to help us receive these messages so we might know God and follow Him. We grow in faithfulness to God and His covenant of grace with us through daily Bible reading, devotional encouragement, and prayer. May this devotional guide help equip you to receive God's message and to share His hope to a world that is in desperate need of Him.

Scott Stewart, Editor

Our Great God

Your ways, God, are holy. What god is as great as our God?
(Psalm 77:13).

Scripture: Psalm 77:11-20

Song: “How Great Is Our God”

The way that entertainment media showcases celebrities might lead us to think they are different from most of us and can do things that we would not be able to do. Through an experience I had at a meal with a celebrity, I discovered how much that well-known person, at least, is a regular human being with challenges, fears, and setbacks similar to my own.

Personal experience with God, however, will never reveal Him to be a “regular human being.” The more we know Him, the more clearly we will see how much “other than us” God is. The psalmist recalls this in Psalm 77:11, which points back to when God delivered the people from Egypt. That story alone is enough to declare in worship that there is no god like our God!

God reached out to Israel in their bondage, and He has reached out to us by sending Jesus to show His deep love for us. Through Jesus, God says, “I love you.” When we recognize God’s great love in His mighty act of raising Jesus from the dead and we receive His salvation, then we experience God’s mighty rescue from the consequences of our sin. There is no other god like our God, who is holy in all His ways.

Holy Father, please rescue me by the power You demonstrated in history and in resurrecting Jesus. In His name, amen.

The Reversal

“Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here [at Abraham’s side]” (Luke 16:25).

Scripture: Luke 16:24-31

Song: “I Will Rise”

We enjoy stories about underdog teams that win, especially in the last seconds of a game. There are countless sports movies with just that plot. The reversal is incredibly attractive and gripping. And maybe for ourselves, we like to imagine that one day we might experience such a reversal and rise from our own down-and-out situation.

Jesus’ stories also celebrate reversal. In His parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16, Jesus juxtaposes a wealthy man with all he could ever want against the poor man who begs for scraps at his gate. But as both men die, we see that for eternity things are the opposite: now the rich man is in torment; Lazarus is comforted. Both of their lives on earth did matter—but not because of their finances. No amount of money could stop the rich man from entering Hell. His hard heart had not followed God’s path.

It’s too simple to say the lesson is about how we use money. Rather, Jesus’ reversal story offers hope to those who relate to Lazarus. While our earthly existence might be torment, in Jesus we are comforted. Bad experiences should not be downplayed, because what is important is that in eternity comfort is offered to those who are afflicted for His name. In Heaven, the righteous underdogs win.

Father, guide our hearts as we seek to live like Jesus. Remind us that in our lowest times, You promise us comfort. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Celebrate

“The whole community of Israel must celebrate [the Passover meal]” (Exodus 12:47).

Scripture: Exodus 12:43-50

Song: “Jesus, We Celebrate Your Victory”

My wife and I celebrate our wedding anniversary between just the two of us at a special dinner or favorite activity. It's about us and our relationship, so no one else gets invited. But for birthdays we might invite family members and many friends. The one common attribute of all the people is some sort of relationship with the birthday person.

The Jewish Passover was more like our birthday celebrations. Israelites, slaves they owned (Exodus 12:44), and also foreign residents (v. 48) were included in the celebration—if they were devoted to God. Relationship with God and obedience to His commands were essential for an invitation to celebrate. It was a special gathering of the devoted around the Passover table. Everyone was there to remember God's work in their lives.

God wants everyone devoted to Him to remember and to celebrate His work in their lives. We should celebrate regularly, even daily. We should celebrate that we have been set free from the eternal consequences of our sin, and we should celebrate other ways God is restoring us as His people. Let celebration of your freedom in Christ enrich and strengthen your testimony to other believers and to people who have not yet understood and accepted the invitation into God's family.

Father, help us to celebrate all that You have done in our lives. Remind us of Your great works, and give us strong witness to the world for Your mighty name. In Jesus' name, amen.

Everyone Can Be Included

“A foreigner residing among you is also to celebrate the LORD’s Passover in accordance with its rules and regulations” (Numbers 9:14).

Scripture: Numbers 9:9-14

Song: “All Who Are Thirsty”

I had a school classmate whom most kids did not like. He wanted to be included, but most thought he was “weird” and made him an outcast. However, the so-called outcast and I enjoyed each other and became friends. One of my other friends told me that he didn’t like my new friend, the outcast. Perhaps silly, but I told that friend that I couldn’t be friends with him unless he started being nice to my new friend. Apparently that was all it took because we three became good friends after that. The so-called outcast was slowly becoming included.

God does not make an outcast of anyone who will fear Him. The Lord gave Moses specific instructions to include residents from other nations in their Passover celebrations, if they held to the covenant regulations for Passover. God has rules but also amazing grace. He has always made a way for all who will come to receive His salvation, and a place at the table where His people gather. God has made a way for everyone to come into communion with the Lord. Since God welcomes everyone, we are called to reach out and welcome anyone into the family of God and to include in our faith communities all who respond.

Father, thank You for inviting me in and making me part of Your family. Strengthen me as I show Your love to others and guide people into relationship with You. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Devoted to God

The LORD said to Moses, “Consecrate to me every firstborn male” (Exodus 13:1).

Scripture: Exodus 13:1-2; Deuteronomy 15:19-20

Song: “You Are My All in All”

God commanded His people to worship Him in festivals, special meals, and offerings at the temple. Today’s verse is God’s command to consecrate every firstborn son. Every baby boy that was a couple’s first child was to be set apart for God. This was an offering of dedication given out of the parents’ devotion to God. It was also a public declaration that God provides for, and protects, His people. There is a lot of significant meaning embedded in this command.

This instruction is given in the context of other commands for Passover. The consecration of firstborn males reminded the people of the blood of lambs that protected their firstborn sons in Egypt (Exodus 12:13, 29-30), just before they were released from slavery. In dedicating a son to God, the child became a living symbol of God’s grace in the people’s past and also evidence of their confidence that His grace would continue into the future.

All believers today are urged to dedicate ourselves to God (Romans 12:1). We do this in response to God’s mercy for us. Each day we are to look to Scripture and seek how we will give ourselves to Him and to others in His name—because we love God and enjoy the blessing of His grace and mercy in our lives.

Father, I consecrate myself to You. Please help me recognize how to give myself in service to You and the people I can help today. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Go Tell

“On [the day you celebrate the exodus] tell your son, ‘I do this because of what the LORD did for me’” (Exodus 13:8).

Scripture: Exodus 13:3-10

Song: “Shout to the North”

I enjoy telling stories about my travels and other experiences. Stories help people know about me and understand some of the events that have shaped who I am.

God shaped His people and formed their identity through many experiences of His mighty deliverance and provision. They remembered these events and told them to their children to help the children learn their history and be able to pass their faith to the next generation. Parents wanted to tell their God-stories, but God also commanded that they tell them. The stories were written in the Torah (Genesis–Deuteronomy) but also on their hearts because of their power. The most important stories are in Exodus about how God protected the Israelites’ firstborn sons from the final plague on Egypt at Passover, as well as during the Israelites’ subsequent exodus from Egypt. Children learned that God rescued them from slavery by His grace. God’s mighty actions for their freedom shaped their identity as individuals and as a nation.

Believers have stories to tell from Scripture and also from their lives. Our children, families, and friends will benefit when we tell them what God has done in the past, and especially in our lives. We are to tell the world what the Lord has done for us.

Father, I owe everything in my life to You. Help me share my testimony with others so they will know how beautifully You work in the world. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Listen Closely

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet. . . . You must listen to him (Deuteronomy 18:15).

Scripture: Deuteronomy 18:15-22

Song: “Be Still and Know”

I quickly learned as a substitute teacher that my voice does not always gain the respect of the class. Students might assume that a substitute can't discipline them. But on a few occasions another teacher, one the students knew, stepped into the classroom and spoke. The students respected that teacher and listened. Authority rests on the ability to call people to account for their actions and to be able to give out consequences.

God promised the people a prophet who would speak the words that God would give the prophet to say. The prophet is a messenger; God is the authority behind the message. The validity of the messenger is proven when the prophet's message is fulfilled.

Israel gained a long record of rejecting God's prophets, even though they proved themselves valid. People also rejected Jesus, who prophesied that He would be crucified and rise again (Matthew 20:17-19). History validates Jesus as the Son of God. We can trust Jesus. He is worthy of our exclusive attention and full obedience. There is no substitute for Jesus. He cares so much about us. When we listen to Him and obey, we receive God's blessing and goodness in our lives.

Father, open my ears to Your voice and help me follow Your instructions on how to live. Guide me as I meditate on the sweet words of Jesus, then apply them to my life. In Jesus' name, amen.

God Has No Blind Spots

By faith [Moses] left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible (Hebrews 11:27).

Scripture: Hebrews 11:23-31

Song: “By Faith”

The bay horse galloped toward the final jump. Its hooves thudded against the ground, sending up puffs of dirt. As its rider crouched low, the horse left the ground. Everyone cheered when the horse soared over the jump to land safely and win the prize. Once a horse takes off, it can no longer see the jump. Eyes on the sides of their heads give horses a wide-angle view to guard against predators, but they have blind spots in front and behind. Horses must trust their riders, who have gone ahead to check the jumps, and who go with them to guide them up and over to safety.

Perhaps Moses' feet sent up puffs of sand as he fled Egypt. Obstacles loomed ahead, and he couldn't see what lay beyond. But Moses chose to trust and follow God. He knew from experience that God went before him and would be with him to guide him to safety and his reward on the other side.

Many times we face obstacles that blind our way. But God has no blind spots, and we can trust Him to go before us in every situation and be with us through them all.

Father, help us trust You to guide us safely through every obstacle to our final reward with You. In Jesus' name, amen.

March 8–14. **Kathy O'Neill** lives in Colorado with her husband. She teaches art and Christian history and serves in local ministries.

Darkness to Light

Jesus asked [a man who was born blind], “What do you want me to do for you?”

“Lord, I want to see,” he replied.

Jesus said to him, “Receive your sight; your faith has healed you” (Luke 18:40-42).

Scripture: Luke 18:35-42

Song: “Fairest Lord Jesus!”

Claude Monet, the French impressionist who saw and painted how light changed the colors of meadows and cathedrals and water, was going blind as he was working on his last and most famous series, Water Lilies. As a young man, Monet said that it was as if a veil had fallen from his eyes when he first painted outside and saw the effects of changing light.

Though in the early 1900s cataract surgery was often dangerous, Monet had two operations so he could finish the water lily paintings and give their beauty to the world. As fair as those flowers are, though, when Jesus stopped in Jericho to miraculously take away the veil from a poor man’s physical and spiritual eyes, the first thing the man saw was fairer than any flower or work of art, for he saw the eternal beauty of his Savior.

Every person in the world is spiritually blind before Jesus removes the veil from their eyes. Each of us must, like the man in Luke 18, boldly call on Jesus and humbly ask Him to open our eyes to see His beauty and His salvation.

Father, thank You for changing our darkness into light so we may see the beauty of Jesus, our Savior. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Shadowy Thoughts

The manna stopped the day after they ate this food from the land (Joshua 5:12).

Scripture: Joshua 5:8-12

Song: “Still, My Soul, Be Still”

We were squished into one motel room, and everyone else was asleep—my husband, two children, and a large dog who twitched as she chased squirrels in a dream. But my thoughts kept chasing after recent events: the going-away party, loading the truck, and the first day on the road with excited children and an anxious dog. The adventure had begun, but as outside lights made shadows on the ceiling, worry made shadows in my mind. My husband’s salary had stopped. Could my teaching job alone support us while he attended seminary? Would God help us adjust from a rural town to city life and new schools?

The Israelites were moving, leaving the desert for the cities of the promised land. Excited men, women, children, and anxious animals had crossed the Jordan River on dry land and camped near Jericho. The adventure had begun; but within days the manna, the visible sign of God’s care and protection, stopped. Could they go forward to meet the challenges ahead with faith that God would fulfill His promises?

We go through many challenging transitions in life—new jobs, marrying, having children, retiring. We often worry, but the Lord reminds us of His faithful care in the past and urges us go forward to meet the challenges, confident that He will be faithful to fulfill His promises in the future too.

Father, thank You for Your faithfulness that never fails to guide us through all life’s transitions. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Haystack Prayers

On the second day [the seven priests and the armed men] marched around the city once and returned to the camp (Joshua 6:14).

Scripture: Joshua 6:6-14

Song: “Jesus Shall Reign”

In 1806, five Williams College students prayed in a meadow in western Massachusetts. One student, Samuel Mills, wanted Americans to take the gospel beyond America, but some believed other lands might need to be civilized or even conquered by armies first. A sudden thunderstorm drove the students to take shelter in a haystack. They prayed and continued praying for God to open the way for foreign missions. Four years later they persuaded New England ministers to form the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions, which soon sent missionaries to India. Within 50 years it had sent out over 1,000 more missionaries. Praying under the shelter of a haystack may seem strange, but God used this beginning to launch worldwide American missions.

God’s strategy to take Jericho seemed strange too. March around Jericho for seven days, blowing trumpets without shooting a single arrow? But then, on the seventh day, God brought down the walls of Jericho and launched the conquest of the land.

Day after day, even year after year, we may pray for someone to accept Christ or for a difficult situation to change. If we see no result, we may question God’s wisdom. At those times we must remember the experiences of God’s people and trust that He knows the best way and time to answer our prayers.

Father, help us trust You to accomplish Your purposes. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Shelter in the Storm

“This oath . . . will not be binding . . . unless . . . you [Rahab] have tied this scarlet cord in the window” (Joshua 2:17-18).

Scripture: Joshua 2:15-24

Song: “A Shelter in the Time of Storm”

A Colorado blizzard raged outside. Wind plastered snow against our windows until only a gray light filtered through. Meteorologists had predicted the dangerous storm and warned people to stay home. But the day began with little indication of the coming storm, and many people went out to work or shop. By midday the pressure dropped rapidly, and the weather exploded into what is called a bomb cyclone. Snow and accidents blocked highways, stranding people in their vehicles. Thousands of frightened motorists had to be rescued and taken to shelters.

Outside Rahab's house in Jericho, a battle raged. The day had begun like the past six, with the Israelites marching around the walls, but today the army circled seven times. And after a great shout, Jericho's walls crumbled. Now sounds of clashing spears filled the streets, and frightened people found no safety. Rahab's house, however, did provide safety because the scarlet cord identified it as a house where people trusted God for shelter, rather than manmade walls.

The walls of our Colorado house stood firm through the blizzard, but manmade walls do sometimes crumble. The promises of Christ's protection will never crumble, though; they will stand firm through every storm. When we shelter under the cross of Christ, we can be confident God will watch over us through whatever life brings.

Father, thank You for sheltering us through the storms of life. In Jesus' name, amen.

True Hope

Joshua said to the two men who had spied out the land, “Go into the prostitute’s house and bring her out . . . in accordance with your oath to her” (Joshua 6:22).

Scripture: Joshua 6:22-25

Song: “Jesus Paid It All”

Emma Whittemore, a wealthy socialite, attended an evangelistic meeting at a city mission in New York City’s slums. There she committed her life to serving God and began helping in the mission. Still, when Emma felt called to ministry among prostitutes, she asked God for some other, any other, calling. She soon asked His forgiveness and began work that often broke her heart but also brought blessings to her and many women. In 1890, Emma opened her first Door of Hope home so women could leave the streets and find hope in Christ for a changed life. More homes soon opened around the world.

In Jericho God did not wait for Rahab to become “good enough” before changing her heart to believe in Him. Her faith led her to defy danger to help the Israelite spies. And when they returned to rescue her, she knew it was in fulfillment of God’s promise to open a door to her future as part of His family.

Over and over, God shows us that no one is too sinful to be saved. He can open the heart of even the worst sinner to believe in Christ’s sacrifice and be saved. Jesus is the door of hope that leads to a changed life.

Father, thank You for rescuing us and opening the door so we may live for You. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Safe Harbor

Then the LORD said to Joshua, “See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands” (Joshua 6:2).

Scripture: Joshua 5:13–6:5, 15-16, 20

Song: “Hallelujah, What a Savior!”

At tremendous cost, the D-Day invasion established a beachhead, but without supplies the armies couldn't advance far. Hitler had heavily fortified northern Europe's ports, so the Allies built artificial harbors and assembled one off Arromanches, a small beach town on Normandy's coast. Right after D-Day, engineers sank old ships as a breakwater and assembled miles of floating docks and roadways that stretched from the beach out to deep water so large ships could unload men and supplies. This safe harbor allowed Allied soldiers to penetrate Hitler's Atlantic Wall and liberate Europe.

The Israelites crossed the Jordan, but could go no farther without taking Jericho, which guarded the passes into Canaan. But a direct assault on the heavily fortified city was almost impossible, and a siege would dangerously slow their advance. The Lord gave Joshua a specific battle plan and also gave Jericho into his hand. The Israelites could miraculously penetrate Jericho's walls and enter the promised land to find a safe harbor from their enemies.

Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection won the battle over sin and death and opened the way for all who believe in Him to enter an eternal promised land, where there is no more sin or disease or death. There we will find a safe and restful harbor for our souls.

Father, thank You for sending Jesus so we may put our faith in Him and receive eternal life through His victory over death. In Jesus' name, amen.

The Right Path

All the paths of the LORD are mercy and truth unto such as keep his covenant and his testimonies (Psalm 25:10, *KJV*).

Scripture: Psalm 25:1-10

Song: “Trust and Obey”

Rain clouds gathered overhead, and my legs ached as I looked again at the state park’s map. My efforts to get a proper bearing among the woods, ravines, and spiderweb of trails were failing. The trails weren’t marked as shown on the map, and I was lost. Being a type 2 diabetic, I needed to get back to my car as soon as possible. I feared my blood sugar would drop suddenly. But how to get back? So many paths. Which one to follow?

“Lord, help me,” I prayed. And I believe that He did, leading me to the most direct and easiest path to my car. I received His direction that day as His mercy. Had I veered from that one path, I might have been in trouble.

If we veer from God’s precepts, we’ll fall into the deep ravine of sin. The only way out is to follow the paths of the Lord. Unlike the trails in that park, God’s paths are well marked in His Word. They lead us to His mercy and truth, where we receive perfect counsel for our daily living. Learn to walk in obedience to the Lord and His wonderful Word.

Father, lead me in the right paths, Your paths, full of mercy and truth. In Jesus’ name, amen.

March 15–21. **Jack Cunningham** lives in Alabama and enjoys history and reading. He also serves on his church’s board of stewards and teaches Sunday school.

Resting in God

We which have believed do enter into rest, as he said, As I have sworn in my wrath, if they shall enter into my rest: although the works were finished from the foundation of the world (Hebrews 4:3, *KJV*).

Scripture: Hebrews 4:1-11

Song: “I Will Rest in You”

A few days after a worship meeting in China, Eric boarded a train. Opposite him sat a gloomy young man, his face drawn and his eyes distracted. Concerned, Eric struck up a conversation. The young man poured out his heart, saying he was considering suicide. Providentially, Eric carried in his pocket a letter from a lady he'd met at the meeting. Her face was severely disfigured—she'd even lost an eye and gone deaf; yet at the bottom of her letter, she'd written in Chinese: “Keep Smiling.” Using this, Eric Liddell, former Olympic champion turned missionary, shared the gospel with the man. The man listened to Eric's words and believed. His suicidal thoughts fled and his soul entered into rest, just as the writer of the book of Hebrews said would happen to those who lived by faith.

Are we troubled? Do we find ourselves struggling over issues big and small? This Chinese lady, disfigured though she was, held Christ's joy. She knew God loved her, and the young man came to realize how much God loved him too. God loves us all. By trusting Him to care for us in every situation, we enter into His rest. We will also find joy.

Father, I place my trust in You to carry me through every situation every day. Thank You, Lord. In Jesus' name, amen.

God Provides

I have led you forty years in the wilderness: your clothes are not waxen old upon you, and thy shoe is not waxen old upon thy foot (Deuteronomy 29:5, *KJV*).

Scripture: Deuteronomy 29:1-6

Song: “God Will Make a Way”

George Müller, founder of orphanages and schools for poor children in nineteenth-century England, practiced total dependence on God. To have money and other things his ministry needed, he called on the Lord—never on man. And the Lord always came through, though sometimes His provision came at the last minute. We know this because Müller kept a record of his prayers and God’s answers, even in great difficulties and trials when poverty and necessity seemed overwhelming. Müller experienced God’s grace to trust Him and spoke well of God because of his deep conviction that God never failed him. The Lord always provided for the care and blessing of some 10,000 children through Müller’s lifetime work.

For Israel’s difficulties in the wilderness, the Lord provided. The Israelites’ clothes remained in good condition, and the people never lacked food and drink. In the way that God took care of Müller and his children’s needs, and that God cared for Israel during its wilderness wanderings, He can likewise care for any of His children. When we cast our cares on God, and leave our cares with Him, we can be assured of His grace and care for us.

Father, today I am putting all my worries and cares in Your hands, and I’m leaving them with You. Thank You that You care for me. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Walking in Integrity

Howbeit there was no reckoning made with them of the money that was delivered into their hand, because they dealt faithfully (2 Kings 22:7, *KJV*).

Scripture: 2 Kings 22:1-7

Song: “Let Your Light Shine”

My late grandfather, a bank president in a small southern town, stared in disbelief at the bank’s janitor as the janitor handed him a \$100 bill. “I found it on the floor yesterday while I was sweeping,” the janitor told him. “Er, thank you,” my grandfather said. Stunned by the man’s honesty, my grandfather’s respect for him skyrocketed. Though the janitor might have pocketed this money, he didn’t. My grandfather never worried about this employee stealing anything—he’d proven he could be trusted.

Josiah knew he could trust Hilkiah, and those repairing the temple, with the temple’s money. No reckoning, or accounting, would be made with them regarding it, because they walked in personal integrity. What a testimony they had!

When we walk in integrity, others notice because we’ve become a light in a dark world. Just as my grandfather’s employee resisted the temptation to pocket money that was not his, so we can resist the temptations we encounter. We have the Holy Spirit living inside us, whom we can rely on to help us in similar situations. “Whoever walks in integrity walks securely,” we read in Proverbs 10:9. Not only does integrity give us a good reputation; it makes us good ambassadors for our faithful Lord.

Father, may I be a light to others. May I represent You the right way, the way of integrity. In Jesus’ name, amen.

God's Valuable Word

And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law, that he rent his clothes (2 Kings 22:11, *KJV*).

Scripture: 2 Kings 22:8-13

Song: "Nuggets of Gold"

As I strolled through a bookstore one day during my college years, the title *God's Smuggler* grabbed my attention and led me to purchase the book. Its author, who called himself Brother Andrew, told exciting stories of how God used him to smuggle Bibles into the Soviet Union, where owning them was a crime. It awakened me to the twentieth century's persecuted church. I began praying for my brothers and sisters in oppressive countries. They starved for a copy of God's Word. Many thousands risked their lives to own it. For them it was (and is) more valuable than all the world's silver and gold.

King Josiah valued God's Word. After someone found it during the temple's repair, the court secretary read it to him. In response, Josiah repented of his and his people's sins.

Let's not take God's Word for granted, nor leave it lying around collecting dust as it did in the temple. Instead, follow Josiah's example and that of our persecuted brethren by taking it seriously. Spend quality time reading it, studying it, and memorizing it. This way, if the day ever comes in our society when owning a Bible is a crime, His Word will be well hidden in our hearts.

Father, thank You for the valuable gift of Your holy Scriptures. Teach me to never take Your Word for granted. In Jesus' name, amen.

Follow God

The king . . . made a covenant before the LORD, to walk after the LORD (2 Kings 23:3, *KJV*).

Scripture: 2 Kings 23:1-3

Song: “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus”

During the 1300s, multitudes in Europe believed they were following the Lord, but they weren't. This troubled one famous medieval theologian, John Wycliffe, known to history as the Morningstar of the Reformation. In his book *On the Truth of the Holy Scripture*, he wrote, “To be ignorant of the Scripture is the same thing as to be ignorant of Christ.”

Though many people in his day were sincere, Wycliffe knew that because of their ignorance of what the Bible taught, they were wandering astray. This ignorance stemmed from the fact that they had no English Bible. But the Lord used Wycliffe to translate the Bible into English, and people learned what God required of them.

Since God's Word had been found in the temple, King Josiah learned what God required of him as well. With this knowledge, he made a covenant to “walk after the LORD,” to do those things that pleased Him.

In our generation, Bible translations abound. We don't have to be ignorant of its teaching like those people in the days of Josiah and Wycliffe. Let's determine not to just spend time in God's Word and become knowledgeable about what it teaches; let's also determine to follow God in the way He wants us to—through obeying His Word. Obeying God's teaching is the only way we can truly follow Him.

Father, help me respond, by the power of Your Holy Spirit, to follow You in full and life-long obedience. In Jesus' name, amen.

Humility

Because thy heart was tender, and thou hast humbled thyself before the LORD, when thou heardest what I spake against this place . . . I have also heard thee, saith the LORD (2 Kings 22:19, *KJV*).

Scripture: 2 Kings 22:14-20

Song: “Here I Bow”

Early in my Christian walk, it often seemed like my prayers ricocheted off the ceiling. I’d pray and sometimes pace my apartment shouting at the Lord. I demanded that God act—but He did not. Why? I think it was because of my proud attitude.

King Josiah’s attitude was different. He listened to the Word of the Lord, humbly sought the Lord, and repented. Then the Lord promised to spare him from the judgment about to come down on his kingdom because of its disobedience. And the Lord, as always, kept this promise.

God won’t be manipulated or respond to prideful demands, but He will lend a loving ear to respectful, humble requests. Once I learned this, I’ve seen Him move in my life through answered prayers. I’ve learned that my humility often aligns with God’s answers. This doesn’t mean He always answered my prayers in the way I wanted, but He has always answered them in ways that were best for me. Over the years I’ve learned that by approaching God with the reverence and humility He deserves, we’ll see Him marvelously move in our behalf.

Father, I bow before You today with reverence and awe. I am grateful to You for all the prayers You’ve answered in my life, and for those prayers You will answer in the future. In Jesus’ name, amen.

He Stands Alone

Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus (Mark 9:8).

Scripture: Mark 9:2-8

Song: “Lord, Thou Art God’s Anointed”

As a little girl, I watched the Miss America pageant every fall. I’d pick a favorite contestant out of the five sparkling finalists and hold my breath while the tuxedoed emcee read the judges’ decision. When the winner was revealed, several people immediately encircled her and gave her a crown and a tremendous bouquet of flowers. Then, just as suddenly, she would be in the spotlight alone and walk the runway as the new reigning Miss America.

God set Jesus apart from Moses and Elijah. Christ stands alone as the fulfillment of the Law and Prophets. He is unique as the Son of God. Through a cloud of glory, the Father declared Jesus to be His beloved Son, His chosen.

Have we looked at Jesus and chosen Him above all others? Have we put Jesus in His rightful place of honor in our hearts? Let us consider this glorious Savior who put on flesh and acknowledge once again that He is Lord. He deserves first place in our thoughts, words, and actions. May the glorious Lord Jesus reign today in every aspect of our lives.

Father, fill me with anticipation for the day I’ll see You in glory. May I set You above everything and everyone else today. In Jesus’ name, amen.

March 22–28. **Sara Schaffer** lives in Colorado with her husband and two daughters. She enjoys studying God’s Word, cooking, puzzles, and having fun with her family.

Refocus

[The disciples] asked [Jesus], “Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?” (Mark 9:11).

Scripture: Mark 9:9-13

Song: “O God, in Christ All Focused Is”

When blurry images first came from the Hubble Space Telescope, scientists realized that something was wrong with the main observatory mirror. After an investigation, they discovered the mirror had not been calibrated to see properly in an airless atmosphere. Engineers designed new optics and instruments, and three years after Hubble’s initial launch, astronauts installed the corrective lens. The subsequent clear images from Hubble showed the venture’s success.

Similar to the case of the telescope, Elijah came ahead of the Messiah to refocus God’s people. The nation of Israel had a blurry understanding of why they even needed a Savior. John the Baptist, who came in the spirit and power of Elijah, encouraged people to acknowledge their sin, repent, and prepare for the Christ. John turned people’s hearts back to God so they would have a chance of understanding that the Messiah had come. John acted as a corrective lens to sharpen people’s focus on Jesus.

Are we living with a vague awareness of God? We too need to hear and heed the message of Elijah and John by confessing our pride and independence from God. We can ask God to sharpen our eyes and understanding by helping us to read, meditate, and understand the Scriptures each day. Let us allow ourselves to be recalibrated so we can clearly see Christ through His Word.

Father, we humbly refocus our eyes on You. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Secret Service

Obadiah was a devout believer in the LORD (1 Kings 18:3).

Scripture: I Kings 18:1-4

Song: “Father, I Know That All My Life”

Sell them into servitude, the father decided. This would give his three daughters a way to survive, since they were without money for their dowries. He saw no other path. The father had once been a wealthy citizen of Patara—a town in the Roman province of Lycia. Around AD 300, when a plague struck their city, he and others faced severe situations. A young man who had lost his parents but not their wealth, heard of the three daughters' plight. Resolved to serve Christ unreservedly, he secretly went three nights in a row and bestowed three bags of gold—one for each girl's dowry. It was enough to save them from servitude.

Like the man who gave away his gold, Obadiah worked in secret and saved lives. He demonstrated his faith by rescuing and sustaining 100 people through a drought and persecution. The generous, orphaned young man and Obadiah could have decided to take care of themselves. Instead they took action in their difficult situations to assist the people around them.

How do we live out our belief in God? Do we see challenging circumstances as a reason to help others, or as an excuse for why we cannot? What anonymous action might God be asking us to take to bless and maybe even save someone else? We too can choose to be demonstratively devout.

Father, please give me the courage and opportunity to express my faith in secret service for You today. In Jesus' name, amen.

He's God in Controversy or Complacency

When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, “The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!” (1 Kings 18:39).

Scripture: 1 Kings 18:20-26, 30-33, 36-39

Song: “Dear Father God, the Sole ‘I Am’”

In 1414 Germany, the Council of Constance asked Jan Hus to attend. Hus opposed the selling of indulgences and wanted to urge his fellow church leaders to stop this practice. He believed one couldn't buy forgiveness; atonement was from Christ alone. When Hus arrived in Constance, however, they arrested him. Without giving him a chance to defend himself, the Council declared Hus a heretic and burned him at the stake on July 6, 1415.

Similar to the deadly differences of opinion in fifteenth-century Germany, God's true prophets in Elijah's day were being killed off by Queen Jezebel (1 Kings 18:4). Interestingly, both sides seemed open to a contest between Baal and God. However, on Mount Carmel the Baal prophets had no response from their inert idol. In contrast, God distinguished himself. He consumed with fire not only Elijah's offering but also the entire altar and trench of water. The people immediately acknowledged, “He is God!”

In modern times, many voices assert that all religions can coexist. This highlights the desperate need for God's Word for the truth. Whether we find ourselves in controversy or complacency, God still longs to make himself known. Let us exalt Him in our current circumstances as the one who is singularly God.

Father, help me to boldly defend the truth that You alone are God and that in Christ alone we find forgiveness. In Jesus' name, amen.

Strengthened for the Journey

The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, “Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you” (1 Kings 19:7).

Scripture: 1 Kings 19:1-8

Song: “Be Still, My Heart! All Anxious Cares”

John Bunyan spent more than a dozen years incarcerated in the harsh conditions of Bedford Gaol in seventeenth-century England. At times he was released only to be jailed again for preaching Scripture without a license. Sitting in his prison cell in 1677, John wrote a new book with inspired ease. He described his own struggles and victories through a protagonist named Christian. In the allegory, Christian’s path to the Celestial City showed the universal temptation, despair, hope, and salvation that believers face.

The story illustrated how John Bunyan’s journey, like Elijah’s, was at times too much for him. Elijah received a death threat from Queen Jezebel for his strong stand against Baal worship. John received threats and punishment from his government for preaching the Word. Their persecution often meant standing firm in faith without others directly able to support and strengthen them.

In what ways, if any, are we facing persecution for our faithfulness? When we find our courage failing, God doesn’t get angry. He shows His understanding of our weakness. He nurtures and revives us so we may continue the journey in His strength to His glory.

Father, thank You for how well You know me. When the journey becomes too much, I trust You are more than able to sustain and renew me. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Going Back and Stepping Forward

The LORD said to him, “Go back the way you came”
(1 Kings 19:15).

Scripture: 1 Kings 19:9b-15

Song: “If Thou But Suffer God to Guide Thee”

After her release from Ravensbruck concentration camp, Corrie Ten Boom returned home to Haarlem, Netherlands. One day someone asked her to help the underground like she'd bravely done before her arrest, but the task terrified her. She realized that any previous courage was from God, and He had new work for her to do. She began to speak of His healing love. She opened a recovery home where many emotionally wounded soldiers and former prisoners came for healing. Soon a larger location became necessary. One became available: the site of a former concentration camp.

God sent Corrie back the way she had come. Though it was not the same place of imprisonment, God put her in a previous place of death to now minister life. She obeyed, and the facility at Darmstadt opened for her work. Elijah also returned by his previous path. Though initially full of despair on Mount Horeb, Elijah heard God in a gentle whisper. He stepped forward and listened to His instructions.

Our lives may not be at risk, but God might ask us to go back to difficult places. In obediently returning, however, we can step forward with confidence. God restores and renews, and He will strengthen us for all He asks us to do.

Father, if You call me to go back the way I came, I trust You will embolden and empower me to do Your work. In Jesus' name, amen.

Better Together

“Haven’t you heard, my lord, what I did . . . ? I hid a hundred of the LORD’s prophets in two caves, fifty in each, and supplied them with food and water” (1 Kings 18:13).

Scripture: 1 Kings 18:5-18

Song: “As the Body Is the Fulness”

At 250 words per minute, Bidy took down the lectures and musings of her Bible-teaching husband. Her stenographer skills were twice the speed of most secretaries, and she excelled in rapid, precise typing as well. Gertrude Hobbs, aka Bidy, and Oswald Chambers knew when they married that her outstanding administrative abilities complemented his talent to communicate the Word of God. As he taught, she transcribed his lectures into books, allowing God’s message to be shared with a larger audience.

Similarly, Elijah and Obadiah—both devoted to the Lord—had contrasting roles during King Ahab’s reign. Elijah was on the run while Obadiah served directly with the king. Obadiah secretly served God by hiding many of His followers; Elijah openly called the wavering Israelites to worship God alone. Likewise, we may work with people who have different jobs and personalities from our own.

The various parts of the body Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 12 illustrate how all our gifts and responsibilities are connected parts of God’s design. When we can’t see the blessings, may we humbly serve with others in faith, trusting that by working together we are reaching many more people than we ever could alone.

Father, help me to see others through Your eyes, and give me a divine perspective on how our different gifts can lead to Your glory. In Jesus’ name, amen.

A Greater Purpose

[God's servant] is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief (Isaiah 53:3, *KJV*).

Scripture: Isaiah 52:13–53:3

Song: “Be Thou My Vision”

I came across a wise saying: “Rejection by others does not always mean you aren’t good enough, but that people failed to understand or appreciate what you offer.” This cannot be said to anyone more than it could be said about the suffering servant in Isaiah’s prophecy. However, when we feel the spear of rejection, platitudes give no comfort. Snappy quotes do not soothe the burn or stop the sting.

Jesus felt keenly the scorn and contempt of those who rejected Him, yet His prayer from the cross was, “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34). He focused on future glory with those who would love Him, and willingly submitted to His Father’s wise and perfect plan. Jesus knew there was a greater purpose in His suffering; He understood that the magnificent redemption story was unfolding.

It is only through the healing power of forgiveness and a Savior-centered focus that peace can be restored to our wounded hearts. Joy can return to us when we understand He has a higher purpose in all that touches our lives. He sees the bigger picture and is unfolding His gracious redemptive story in our lives.

Father, help me to see only Jesus, to focus on the suffering He endured to purchase my redemption. Thank You that I am accepted in Him. In Jesus’ name, amen.

March 29–April 4. **Sandra Vosburgh** lives in upstate South Carolina. She is a Bible teacher, director of women’s ministry, pastor’s wife, and grandmother.

Reach One

Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told [the Ethiopian official] the good news about Jesus (Acts 8:35).

Scripture: Acts 8:26-35

Song: “Lead Me to Some Soul Today”

A Sunday school teacher had a disinterested, biblically illiterate teenager in his class; yet Edward Kimball longed for Dwight L. Moody to know the Lord, and pursued him with the love of Christ. Mr. Kimball could not have known the plans God had for this young man or that Moody would become a world-renowned evangelist. Edward Kimball simply obeyed God’s leading and shared the gospel message with him.

The Lord called Philip to leave the revival in Samaria and go to the desert. There Philip found a high-ranking official from Ethiopia reading and puzzling over Isaiah’s prophecy regarding a lamb led to slaughter. Philip testified of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who would be slain for the sins of the people. Philip was willing to leave the crowds and be led by the Spirit to one man in the wilderness.

We may not be called to speak to the masses like D. L. Moody, but we are called to reach the one in front of us who may be on a wilderness journey—lost, confused, and searching for truth. We do not know God’s plan for him or her, but we know that His plan for us, His people, is simply to obey His leading and lovingly share the gospel message.

Father, help us to testify of You to the ones You place in our paths today. Help us to reach them with Your love. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Blindsided

“[The Gentiles] will flog [the Son of Man] and kill him. On the third day he will rise again.” The disciples did not understand any of this (Luke 18:33-34).

Scripture: Luke 18:31-34

Song: “I Am Not Skilled to Understand”

A movie scene showed a woman summoned to the office of the CEO. Believing she would receive a promotion, the woman entered the office with great anticipation. The CEO stood up, walked around his desk, and fired her!

The disciples believed Jesus was the Son of Man spoken of by Daniel the prophet, the one who would receive an everlasting kingdom and have dominion over all people and nations, including their current oppressor, Rome. So when Jesus told them He would be killed and rise again the third day, they reeled. They did not understand. They could not reconcile His words with their own beliefs. Perhaps, like the woman in the movie, they were blindsided because they had their own ideas of how things would be.

So many times we do not understand the how and when of things. We may set our hopes on one thing only to be blindsided by something completely unexpected. We might feel as if God has let us down. That may be a good time to consider where we would be if Jesus had not gone to the cross. The disciples eventually came to understand that God’s way was best, and so will we.

Father, help us to let go of any preconceived ideas that limit Your work in our lives. Your plan is best, and we want to be fully open to it. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Remember What He Told You

“[Jesus] is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee” (Luke 24:6).

Scripture: Luke 24:1-12

Song: “Wonderful Words of Life”

My breath caught in my throat when I entered a friend’s room at the nursing facility and found her bed empty. Not knowing she had been moved to a different room, I immediately became alarmed.

Several women went early in the morning to the tomb where the body of Jesus had been laid. We can imagine their surprise at finding the large stone no longer blocking the entrance. But can we imagine their panic when they looked inside and did not see the Lord’s body? In the moments of their distress and confusion, an angel appeared and told them to remember the words of Jesus. Jesus had told them He would be crucified and on the third day He would rise again. They remembered. And with great joy they ran to the disciples and told them Jesus had risen. Jesus is alive! The dark and empty tomb became evidence of victory and the source of joy.

When we face times of confusion or distress, we too must remember His Word. Jesus said, “The Holy Spirit . . . will remind you of everything I have said to you” (John 14:26). With the remembrance of His Word, victory and joy can enter every dark and empty place we may encounter.

Father, thank You for our living Savior. And thank You for Your living Word that guides, comforts, and sustains us in our time of need. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Sympathy Has an Ear

As [two of the disciples] talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them (Luke 24:15).

Scripture: Luke 24:13-27

Song: “I Would Be Like Jesus”

At the writer's conference, I sat at a round table of eight. Throughout the meal, one person did nearly all the talking—about himself! The woman next to me leaned over and whispered, “Some people like to be the hero of their own story.” Indeed, we all like to talk. But today's Scripture shows us there is a time to listen.

The two men on the Emmaus road were discouraged, heartbroken, and struggling to make sense of the death of the one they loved. They thought Jesus was the Messiah and would deliver them from oppression. But their hopes had been crushed. When Jesus drew near to them, He did not say “I know how you feel” and then proceed to quote Scripture. He prompted the men to talk, to share everything they had experienced in Jerusalem. He walked beside them . . . and listened. Afterward, He opened the Scriptures and helped them to understand.

To be like Jesus is to walk beside those who are heartbroken and listen to their stories. With a sympathetic ear we allow them to give voice to their sorrow. This may in turn grant us the right and the freedom to open the Scriptures and help those who are hurting to understand the gospel message.

Father, give me a sympathetic ear today as I walk beside those who are hurting. Help me to know when to listen and when to speak. In Jesus' name, amen.

I'll Host the Missionary

[The two disciples] urged [Jesus] strongly, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.” So he went in to stay with them (Luke 24:29).

Scripture: Luke 24:28-35

Song: “Abide with Me”

When my family hosts a missionary in our home, we often receive a small gift that represents the country in which they serve. However, the best gift is the richness he or she adds to our lives. As we learn about the missionary's life and ministry on the foreign or home field, we learn more about our Savior and His work in the world today.

The two men on the road to Emmaus opened their home to an interesting traveler. Throughout the evening, enjoying food and fellowship, the men came to realize that the stranger before them was in fact the risen Savior. Their sorrow turned to joy. With burning hearts, they immediately returned to Jerusalem to tell other disciples they had seen the Lord. Once there, they again met the risen Christ. What joys were theirs because they willingly ministered to the weary traveler.

As I review my missions shelf with items from Albania, Guatemala, China, and other nations, I recall the names and faces of God's humble servants who have enriched our lives. What blessings can be ours when we open our homes and our hearts to those who sacrifice so much to serve the Lord at home and abroad.

Father, thank You for the opportunities we have to serve You through hospitality. Open our hearts to receive Your blessings as we open our homes to receive Your servants. In Jesus' name, amen.

The Only Way

It pleased the LORD to bruise [God's servant]; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin (Isaiah 53:10, *KJV*).

Scripture: Isaiah 53:4-11

Song: "By His Wounds"

It may seem inconceivable to us that God, who loves His Son, would allow Him to suffer. But I think of the moment when the doctor lanced a boil on my 9-month-old son's lower back. I remember the "knife" in my own heart as I heard my baby cry out in pain. Yet it was my will that it should be done; it was the only way to remove the infection and bring about healing.

Our Father did not delight in the suffering of His Son. But it was His will. The offering up of the life of Jesus Christ to the cruelty of the cross was the only sacrifice sufficient to pay the penalty of our sin. Jesus was wounded for our transgressions, and by His wounds the poison of our sin is removed and our broken relationship with God is healed.

When the doctor finished, I held my son close to reassure him of my love and calm him with my presence. When we are in Christ, our Father picks us up and holds us close to himself. He reassures us with His presence and pours out on us His unconditional love. Jesus made this possible, and that pleases the Father.

Father, thank You for not sparing Your Son, but for giving Him up to take our sin and to bear sin's penalty on our behalf. In Jesus' name, amen.

Tell the World

“God has helped me to this very day; so I stand here and testify to small and great alike” (Acts 26:22).

Scripture: Acts 26:19-23

Song: “O God, Our Help in Ages Past”

Summer Dickerson is a survivor of human trafficking. She ran away from home at the age of 15 and was pulled into prostitution and drug addiction. She eventually escaped and now—because of the transformation God brought in her life—is an advocate who defends and helps to rescue women from human trafficking and domestic abuse.

Paul was defending himself, from his Jewish accusers, before Agrippa and Festus (Acts 26:2). He outlined what his life was like before Christ and how Jesus rescued him and changed his life. He reminded Agrippa that everything he was preaching was what the prophets and Moses had already said would happen and did happen. Paul proclaimed the hope that all who believe in Jesus can have (v. 7) regardless of how far away we might be.

When our lives have been changed, we want everyone to know about it. We want others to experience the same changes and freedom in their lives. Paul became a witness and preached the transformation Jesus brings. Summer Dickerson is another witness, to women trapped in abuse like she was, about God’s help. God calls all His people to tell how He rescues.

Father, thank You for transforming my life. Help me be open to sharing Your love with someone today. In Jesus’ name, amen.

April 5–11. **Amanda Fillebrown** lives in southern Indiana with her husband. She gladly serves her church, family, friends, and community and enjoys art and theater.

Completely Changed

You were taught . . . to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:22, 24).

Scripture: Ephesians 4:17-24

Song: “All Things New”

Hydrogen is one of the most abundant elements in the universe. In its natural state, it doesn't have any odor or taste. However, when combined with other elements, its properties change. In the right ratios and the right conditions, mixing carbon, oxygen, and hydrogen together forms common table sugar. A complete transformation occurs. What was once odorless and tasteless is now sweet!

Paul knew total transformation. His life was completely changed when he encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus. His previous life had involved even “murderous threats against the Lord's disciples” (Acts 9:1). However, that old life was gone. This new life he was living was the one that he was created to live—the one that reflected the image of Christ. A life that was defined by righteousness and holiness.

When we follow Christ, we can live in freedom. We are no longer slaves to sin, doomed because of our corrupt and evil actions. Jesus paid the price for our sins. When we receive God's Spirit to dwell inside us at conversion—when we put on the new self that God gives us—we are made alive. Romans 6:22 tells us that the benefits of that are holiness and eternal life.

Father, thank You for transforming my life and sending Your Spirit to live inside me. Help me to be a reflection of You to others who need to experience Your love and grace. In Jesus' name, amen.

Keep Your Life Pure

“Keep my requirements and do not follow any of the detestable customs that were practiced before you came and do not defile yourselves with them. I am the LORD your God” (Leviticus 18:30).

Scripture: Leviticus 18:24-30

Song: “Nothing But the Blood”

A friend used to make delicious cinnamon candy at Christmas-time, which she shared with my family. But sadly, she didn't share the recipe! My mom and I have failed to replicate the candy using recipes from the Internet. We have concluded that humidity in our kitchens has gotten into the candy and ruined it.

The Lord gave laws that His people were to follow. The instructions were essentially the recipe for their well-being. Obedience would set the people apart from the surrounding cultures and guide them to keep destructive ways out of their lives. God wanted His chosen people to be separate—set apart for a righteous and holy relationship with Him alone, as their one and only God.

Allowing the destructive impact of sin to invade brought ruin to those people, as it does to all of us. We have been defiled—but we are not without hope. Our hope is in the cleansing power of Christ through His blood that was shed for us on the cross. Through Jesus we can be restored and set free to follow Him in a relationship built on grace and forgiveness.

Father, forgive me for the ways I have defiled myself in sin. Thank You for sending Your Son to die on the cross so I can be made clean and set free to live for You. In Jesus' name, amen.

Take Notice!

“[The people and the priests] refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and covered their ears” (Zechariah 7:11).

Scripture: Zechariah 7:8-14

Song: “I Will Follow”

My friend had an old car that got him around faithfully. One day the “check engine” light came on. He couldn’t find the reason and the warning light drove him crazy, so he put a piece of tape over it. The car still drove well, for a while, but eventually started having issues. Then one day he couldn’t get it to start at all. Not taking care of things had only allowed the problem to get worse!

Zechariah wrote how the people refused to listen to and obey what the Lord said to do. Their disobedience was progressive. At first they just casually ignored His words by refusing to pay attention. Eventually, their lack of attention turned into blatant disobedience as they refused to face the Lord and listen to His instructions. This led to a hardening of their hearts toward the Lord—and toward the people He told them to care for.

We may think ignoring certain commands of God is harmless. However, refusing to listen and act is sin, and there are consequences. What commands and promptings of the Lord have you been ignoring? Perhaps you don’t think they are meant for you. Repent and ask the Lord to forgive you and to soften your heart.

Father, forgive me for disobeying You. Help me act on the strength and courage You give. And help me reach out in love to serve those You have called me to help. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Gather and Listen

All the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law (Nehemiah 8:3).

Scripture: Nehemiah 7:73b–8:6

Song: “Come, People of the Risen King”

A hush spread across the audience as she took the stage. She began to speak about the research outlined in her latest book. Several people reached for pen and paper and began scribbling notes as fast as they could. Since she was a known expert in her field, no one wanted to miss a single piece of the valuable information she was sharing. They knew this information could change their lives.

It took the Israelites 52 days to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem (Nehemiah 6:15). It took the time and resources of everyone to accomplish this task. The completed walls offered them physical protection, but they had another need that was just as important. They needed to receive spiritual strength, which could only be provided by God. Otherwise, they would likely end up in exile again. They gathered together and listened to Ezra read the Law. The people responded with praise and reverence as they bowed down to worship God (8:6).

We must be devoted to gathering together to hear God’s Word. His Word is true and possesses the power to change our lives, if we choose to listen to and live by it. It will strengthen us and help us. Our response upon hearing it should be the same as the Israelites’ response: worship.

Father, thank You for placing me in a community that gathers together to hear Your Word. Let us allow those words we hear to strengthen us and protect us. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Turn Back

“Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength”
(Nehemiah 8:10).

Scripture: Nehemiah 8:9-12

Song: “Joy of the Lord”

When I went in for my yearly physical, my cholesterol was up since my last visit and the doctor expressed concern. Admittedly, I hadn't been watching what I ate or exercising like I knew I should. I have a family history of heart disease. I was disappointed in myself that I had not taken better care of my health. But my health would not have improved if I'd remained stuck in frustration. Instead, I changed my ways.

The Israelites were overcome with grief for their sins. Nehemiah encouraged them not to weep but, rather, to let the grief they felt draw them closer to God. Nehemiah knew that God was pleased with their obedience to Him in working together to rebuild the city walls. They needed to be strengthened by their obedience rather than getting stuck in sadness over their past sins. The conviction that the Israelites felt was a call for them to turn back to God.

Awareness of our sin should prompt us to action that moves us closer to God. Instead of just feeling disappointment in ourselves, we should turn back to God and find the strength to change—knowing that He loves us, He will forgive us when we confess, and He finds joy in us as His children.

Father, forgive me for the ways I have turned away from You. Thank You for the great love that You have for me. I praise You for being my strength. In Jesus' name, amen.

God's Masterpiece

“We have been unfaithful to our God. . . . But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel” (Ezra 10:2).

Scripture: Ezra 10:1-12

Song: “Jesus Christ, My Living Hope”

A practice among many artists is to refuse to call something a mistake. If a stroke of the brush hits the canvas in a way the artist did not intend, he doesn't toss out the whole painting. Instead, he finds a way to cover the mistake in his masterpiece.

The words Shekariah spoke to Ezra about the Jews in today's verse are very encouraging. Despite their disobedience to God, there was still hope. It was not too late for the people then to turn back to God—and it is not too late for us today.

Hope in God is an open door for our future. We have hope, knowing that we are still within God's reach. His forgiveness is still available, and His love for us never changes.

God is the great Creator, and we are His masterpieces. He rewrites a beautiful story of redemption for us through Jesus, when we repent our sins. God is faithful to cover over our sins with the blood of Jesus. In what areas of your life have you strayed from God? There is still hope for you too! Ask God for forgiveness and turn back to Him.

Father, thank You for creating me in Your image and giving me hope through salvation by faith in Your Son, Jesus Christ. I praise You for my hope in Jesus, and I turn away from my sin to follow You more closely. In Jesus' name, amen.

Returning to Mercy

“We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy” (Daniel 9:18).

Scripture: Daniel 9:4-6, 15-19

Song: “Lord, I’m Coming Home”

Thick, black mud caked the tractor’s giant tires. Dennis shifted gears and jammed the gas but with no result. The tractor was stuck. The farm would lose time on spring planting. Head low, Dennis relayed the problem to his dad, Raymond, fully expecting to incur anger. Instead, Raymond laughed. “It happens,” he said. Together they freed the tractor from the mud.

Daniel recognized the sins of himself and the people of Israel. Yet his admittance did not deter him from beseeching God. He boldly requested forgiveness, restoration, and healing from God. He knew that God’s mercy and love were abundant to all.

Often we avoid approaching God. We are fearful of asking for His forgiveness because we are focused on our shortcomings. Yet God desires to lavish mercy and grace on us, not because we are worthy but because He is good. Are you carrying guilt from an addiction and reckless behavior? Have your careless words and angry actions harmed relationships? Do you dread God’s wrath for sinful thoughts and deeds? Take courage from Daniel. Jesus waits patiently and full of love. Receive mercy from His generous heart. Delay no longer; go to Him.

Father, I return to You, confessing my sins to receive the grace of Your forgiveness today. In Jesus’ name, amen.

April 12–19. **Kathleen Dunlap** lives in Colorado with her husband, son, and two crazy dogs. She enjoys cooking new recipes, knitting, and exploring the mountains.

Clearing Out the House

I gave orders to purify the rooms [of the temple], and then I put back into them the equipment of the house of God, with the grain offerings and the incense (Nehemiah 13:9).

Scripture: Nehemiah 13:4-9

Song: “Purify My Heart”

Lynn stared at the boxes of dishes, towels, toys, and clothes. How had she let herself accumulate this stuff? The clutter had to go! God had called her and her husband to mission work. Only a few items could be carried with them. Suddenly Lynn realized: these things served no purpose anymore. God made room in her life for service to others.

Nehemiah was angry with Eliashib for allowing Tobiah, an evil person, to reside in the temple. Nehemiah boldly tossed out Tobiah and all his stuff, then replaced the temple's vessels and furniture. God's house was cleared of junk, refilled with honorable items, and made ready for worship.

As we walk with God, we can accumulate (in addition to physical clutter) unwanted burdens, traits, and even emotions. We may harbor resentment for unfair treatment. We may carry anger over old disappointments. We may linger in fear from past failures. God's desire is for our freedom. He wants us to experience fresh peace and uplifting joy. Reflect quietly on what needs to be removed from your life. Ask the Lord for help in cleansing your soul and mind. Take actions with Him to eliminate the extra baggage you carry. Purification produces health. A healthy heart is strong in love, ready for service.

Father, please remove from my heart, mind, and soul any barriers to serving You and others. In Jesus' name, amen.

Trustworthy Service

Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, . . . a Levite named Pedaiah . . . [and] Hanan son of Zakkur . . . were considered trustworthy. They were made responsible for distributing the supplies to their fellow Levites (Nehemiah 13:13).

Scripture: Nehemiah 13:10-14

Song: “True-Hearted, Whole-Hearted”

Deb watched the third-grade girl who was sitting at the lunch table and eating a meager half sandwich . . . again. Deb knew this girl needed better nourishment to stay focused for long school days. She called her church friends. “I need sack lunches!” she said. All of them, with the school’s support, provided nutritious, filling lunches for the student. The girl no longer went hungry at lunch.

Nehemiah recognized the urgent need to reestablish the distribution of food to the Levites. They could not serve God in the temple if they were working their fields. Nehemiah appointed men with reputations for trustworthiness and kindness to oversee the supply chain. They stood in the gap (think of Ezekiel 22:30) that neglect had caused.

As the Holy Spirit directs our lives, He will grant us opportunities to serve others. He places us exactly where He needs us to be. We offer prayers for a friend’s healing. Or provide clothing for the homeless in our community. Or volunteer at a crisis pregnancy center. We seek to emulate the actions of Jesus. He tirelessly served others as He healed the sick and fed the hungry. Consider who around you may need support, care, or resources. Ask God for grace and peace to do a vital work. Be the one who fills the gap in someone else’s life today.

Father, help us to serve others wholeheartedly because ultimately we are serving You. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Space to Rest

[Nehemiah] commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy (Nehemiah 13:22).

Scripture: Nehemiah 13:15-22

Song: “Satisfied”

In 1810, the United States Congress enacted a law allowing the post office to deliver mail on Sundays. Passionate religious leaders petitioned Congress to revoke the law, as they were concerned about the postal workers foregoing their day of rest and worship. Congress complied. Still today, the USPS post office buildings remain closed on Sundays.

Nehemiah unashamedly rebuked the merchants of Israel for their poor example of working on the Sabbath. He reinstated the Sabbath for the good of Israel. He reminded Israel of the Sabbath’s origin—it was a gift from God. Trying to get ahead on this holy day dishonored Him.

Our culture fosters an endless work cycle. We check our emails incessantly, put in extra hours on weekends, or stay on call for our bosses. Work honors God. It provides support to our communities and families. Yet rest is also vital. What if we took time to skip to-do lists and focus on family and friends? What if we realized our worth lies in our identity in Christ, not in the product we produce or the money we make? Can we make room in our schedules for reflection and communion? God is able to make the remaining hours enough to get everything done. Sabbath realigns us to God’s heart of love and grace. Whether a whole day or a few hours, a break reminds us: we were made for His pleasure, not constant striving.

Father, help us to take the time to rest and to worship You. In Jesus’ name, amen.

The Strength of Our Voice

[Nehemiah] rebuked [men who married foreign women] and called curses down on them (Nehemiah 13:25).

Scripture: Nehemiah 13:23-27

Song: “Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus”

George had trained to become an actor. His booming voice reached all the audience without a modern microphone. But George knew his true calling was to preach the gospel. When the Church of England declined to give him a pulpit, George Whitefield preached in tents and the open air. His riveting oratories captured audiences in London, then in the United States. Many people heard the gospel proclaimed through his voice.

Passion for holiness stirred up Nehemiah. Not intimidated by mainstream culture in his day, he fervently spoke out against leaders of Israel who were blatantly disobeying God's command (Leviticus 21:14; Deuteronomy 7:1-4). His voice alone stood out for God's instruction and truth.

A myriad of messages from the world vie for our attention daily, muddling God's truth with lies. Not only are we Christ's feet and hands, but we are also His voice of hope in a chaotic culture. Our country, families, and our churches crave people full of God's love and compassion. We are called to speak up with passion for truth and faith. When we give advice, care for the needy, support our communities, or lift prayers to Heaven, may we proclaim God's peace over turmoil, His victory over defeat, and His compassion over hate. Ask the Holy Spirit to empower your voice today.

Father, give us strong voices to speak Your truth over the lies the world teaches. In Jesus' name, amen.

The Hand of God

Because the gracious hand of my God was on me [Nehemiah], the king granted my requests (Nehemiah 2:8).

Scripture: Nehemiah 2:1-10

Song: “Precious Lord, Take My Hand”

Ray stared at the eviction notice in his hand. His fledgling church would no longer be able to meet in the industrial building they'd been renting. Ray prayed for God's guidance. Shortly after this prayer, he received information about another empty building, ready for use. He called the landlord. “A church meeting in my building? Wonderful!” the landlord exclaimed. Ray's congregation, after moving to the new location, praised God for His provision.

Nehemiah was a politician and a builder by trade. He was not a prophet or priest, yet he remained connected with God in prayer. He recognized God's hand at work as he traveled back to Jerusalem, gathered a team to rebuild Jerusalem's wall, and battled the opposition to his project.

God's hand protects, provides, guides, and comforts. No matter what vocation we are in—pastor, teacher, plumber, farmer—He works on our behalf when we follow His lead. He provides our financial needs. He paves the way to new job opportunities. He nudges a friend to call us when we are despondent. Do we notice His hand in our lives? Are we acknowledging His work of orchestration? He is creating a beautiful tapestry of our lives. Reflect on your personal history. Thank God for His mighty deeds. Whether the immediate situation is triumph or not-yet-complete, His hand remains on us.

Father, thank You for perfecting Your plan in our lives. Give us Your vision as we navigate our lives today. In Jesus' name, amen.

Rebuilding in Triumph

“Let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace” (Nehemiah 2:17).

Scripture: Nehemiah 2:11-20

Song: “Out of Ashes”

Thomas ignored the phone call from another debt collector. Since graduating from college, his life had dipped low. He slept on friends' couches. He didn't have a car. He couldn't pay bills. He decided to fast and pray, asking God for a breakthrough. God answered with loving friends who aided him. They helped him find a good job. Thomas paid off his debt and got a car. Thankful for God's provision, Thomas rebuilt his life with hope.

Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem with a purposeful heart and a clear vision. God had called him to rebuild the wall as a testimony of God's faithfulness to Israel. Undeterred by critical voices, Nehemiah rallied a team to complete the task. They restored what sin had destroyed.

Even as Christ followers, we will experience failure, loss, sickness, and disappointment. Trials and sin leave an aftermath of devastation and destruction. At the lowest of times, though, God is there. Around us He offers support. Through us He receives glory. Although we might see only the rubble of past mistakes, the ruins of grief, or the ashes of loss, by His power we move forward. When we are insufficient, He suffices. When we are faithless, He is faithful. Lean on His everlasting arms. You are not alone. God can rebuild you. Triumphant, you can rise.

Father, You are good. Thank You that You rebuild us with love and grace and power. In Jesus' name, amen.

Take Time to Wonder

Glorious and majestic are his deeds, and his righteousness endures forever (Psalm 111:3).

Scripture: Psalm 111

Song: “Nobody Loves Me Like You”

On the horizon the tiny glow inched its way into view. The beauty took my breath away and brought tears to my eyes. God’s new day was dawning before me after I’d felt called to that spot to watch His power unfold. Darkness faded as light filled the sky. Magnificent colors were projected, and I felt as if the Creator himself was greeting me. I was humbled and awed by the glory that unfolded in the sky.

Sometimes we get so caught up in the day-to-day busyness of our lives that we lose our sense of wonder. We can let the majesty of His works become mundane to us or we don’t even notice. Psalm 111 was written to praise God and thank Him for all He has created and done for us. It reminds us that everything He does is meant to reveal His glory and majesty.

Don’t miss the beauty that God has created around you. Take time today to view God’s handiwork. Look for the simple ways He offers you an invitation to experience His love and goodness. May you be filled with admiration and wonder as you experience the handiwork of our God.

Father, thank You for this majestic world, which reminds us of Your awesomeness. In Jesus’ name, amen.

April 19–25. **Sarah Sanford** lives in Connecticut. She is a third-grade teacher. She enjoys spending time with friends and family and is an active member of her local church.

Who Is Watching?

People from all languages and nations will . . . say, “Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you” (Zechariah 8:23).

Scripture: Zechariah 8:18-23

Song: “Love Them Like Jesus”

“Let me tell you one more time: Please stop doing that. You are disturbing others and making it hard for them to learn.” This is a common speech heard by my third-grade students. Every day I enter the classroom doors with the best of intentions, but things often go awry within the first half hour. As I watch their faces and body language, I can quickly tell they are tuning me out and my voice is becoming nothing more than a clanging cymbal. “Blah, blah, blah” is probably the sound they hear in their heads.

Our reading today reminds us that every day we are setting an example for others. Zechariah, the prophet, is foretelling that people from different nations will see how God has rewarded His people for their faithfulness—and they will want to be included in the blessings. When people see God in you, they are attracted to the source of your joy and peace. The way we live our lives is often the best witness to our faith. We are setting an example every day, whether we think people are noticing or not.

Take time to reflect on your actions and words. Before you speak, think how it will be received. Today let God’s goodness emanate from you so that those around you may experience a taste of God’s love and grace.

Father, may my words and actions reflect a heart filled with Your truth, peace, and joy. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Our Unchangeable God

You, LORD, sit enthroned forever; your renown endures through all generations (Psalm 102:12).

Scripture: Psalm 102:12-22

Song: “God of All My Days”

It is said that there is nothing guaranteed in life except change. Several years ago I had some major life changes occur all within a year. I started graduate school, my oldest daughter graduated from high school and entered college, and I went through a divorce. With these events, financial, physical, and emotional adjustments occurred in my household. We all felt stressed and fragile. Through it all, however, my faith in our never-changing God was secure and unwavering. I remembered how He had held me through trials in the past, and I was confident He would remain faithful in those days.

The psalmist reminds us that God never changes. His faithfulness endures from generation to generation. Oh, that we would remember this in the midst of our chaotic lives that are always changing! Our jobs, our relationships, our houses, and so forth may change, but we can't change the love of God. The message from today's song reminds us that as we're moving through life, watching seasons come and go, our God remains the same.

Run today to the faithful God who is sitting on His throne forever. No matter what you're going through, He wants to protect you, stand by you, and love you with open arms. Trust Him, remember all He has done for you in the past, and cling to the promises He makes for your future.

Father, thank You that as life changes, You never do. Help me to rest in You today. In Jesus' name, amen.

Look to God for Help

Help us, God our Savior, for the glory of your name (Psalm 79:9).

Scripture: Psalm 79

Song: “Be Still”

December 14, 2012 will vividly remain in my memory. That day 6 teachers and 20 students were killed in an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut. At the time of that horrific incident, I was an assistant principal in an elementary school about 20 miles from Newtown. That event impacted me on many levels—personally, professionally, and spiritually. Colleagues, parents, and family questioned how this could happen. What would make a young man do such an incredibly unimaginable act? Beyond those thoughts and discussions, however, often came, How could God allow the death of so many innocent children?

This is the same cry found in Psalm 79. People have died, their temple has been left in ruins, and lands have been conquered. They have nothing left, and they are feeling forgotten by their God. Additionally, their conquerors are asking, “Where is their God?” In our key verse, the psalmist turns these cries into a cry to God for help. He asks God to help them for the glory of His name.

When events occur that we can't understand and we are left shaking our heads in disbelief, we need to turn our eyes to God. We may not always receive answers, but our trust must remain in God. Ask God to open your heart and mind to His ways today and be confident that even in the worst of times, He is in control.

Father, help us to keep our eyes on You and not on the circumstances surrounding us. In Jesus' name, amen.

Death Is Not the End

Death has climbed in through our windows and has entered our fortresses (Jeremiah 9:21).

Scripture: Jeremiah 9:17-22

Song: “What a Friend We Have in Jesus”

Jeremiah is known as the Weeping Prophet. His purpose was to proclaim God’s message and to urge the people of Judah to turn from their sins and return to God. They were being offered an opportunity to repent and experience revival. In our verses, the prophet is explicitly describing the death, and subsequent grief and sorrow, that will result as a consequence of not turning from their sinful ways.

In our key verse, Jeremiah vividly describes death as having “climbed in through our windows” and “entered our fortresses.” Death is an inescapable event. No matter how strong we are, death will eventually come to us and those we love. However, like the people of Judah, we have an opportunity to experience revival. Our revival has been accomplished through the death of Jesus Christ. We only need to believe in Him and confess our sins, and He will give us everlasting life.

Joseph Scriven wrote today’s song after his fiancée drowned on the night before their wedding. He wrote the words that are so familiar to us, “What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear,” to heal from his pain. If fear has invaded your heart, turn to the Savior today. Open your heart to Him and remember: He is your friend who is waiting to bear your sins and ease your fear.

Father, thank You that in You we need have no fear, even of death. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Great Is His Faithfulness

[God's compassions] are new every morning; great is your faithfulness (Lamentations 3:23).

Scripture: Lamentations 3:22-33

Song: "Faithful God"

"Every day is a fresh start." "Let the past remain in the past, and live for the future." These are just a couple of the expressions we are told throughout life. As a teacher I tell my students, when they are discouraged or misbehaving, that we can turn ourselves around and start anew at any time. All we must do is change our mind-set and move on.

I hope my words to the students are inspirational. If we truly lived them, our lives would hold less stress, less anger, and a lot more joy and peace. But sometimes I don't follow my own words. I hold grudges, let emotions bury themselves deep in my heart, and move forward with the proverbial chip on my shoulder.

Scholars suggest that Lamentations was written as a funeral song for the great capital of Jerusalem. It had been destroyed, the king was gone, and the people had been moved into exile. Despite all this, Jeremiah tells them in our passage that God's mercies begin afresh each morning. Let that be the voice that shouts loudest into your heart today. Don't dwell on all the wrongs and mishaps that have happened to you. Open your heart to God's love and faithfulness. Rejoice in the freshness of a new day to make amends, show mercy, and live in God's unending love.

Father, may we stand firm in Your love and never forget that Your mercies are new every morning. In Jesus' name, amen.

God Is Our Restorer

Restore us to yourself, LORD, that we may return; renew our days as of old (Lamentations 5:21).

Scripture: Lamentations 5:1-22

Song: “Restore My Soul”

My grandfather restored antiques. At estate and rummage sales, he would pick through what others might consider junk and envision what it could be. I would watch him work. First, he would sand pieces down to strip away polish, paint, dirt, and dust that had accumulated over the years. When the piece was down to its naked form, he would begin the restoration process. The finished product of his labor of love would be a magnificent, new piece of furniture. He had the ability to take something old and worn out and restore it to its original beauty and purpose.

In Lamentations 5, Jeremiah pleaded for restoration. Jeremiah realized that only God makes things right. He had watched Jerusalem and its people be stripped of all their glory. There were consequences for years of neglect and selfishness.

Like the old furniture that needed my grandfather, we need the Lord, our healer, to take our broken pieces and restore them to their original glory. If you are feeling beaten down, worn out, and lacking joy, turn to your Father in Heaven. Cry out to Him and ask Him for restoration. He loves you and wants to ease your suffering. He longs not only to bring you back into His arms but also to restore you to the life He has planned for you.

Father, please restore in me the hope You alone can give for a life filled with joy and peace. In Jesus' name, amen.

What Are You Known For?

Jehoshaphat said, “The word of the LORD is with [Elisha].” So the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat and the king of Edom went down to him (2 Kings 3:12).

Scripture: 2 Kings 3:9-17

Song: “Known”

My daughter loves to sing. In fact, she sometimes sings so loud as she worships that the leader onstage can pick out her voice. I am known as “the mom of the girl who sings.” She is known in our church for her desire to worship because of her love for God.

Think about the things you are known for. Elisha was known for listening to God and speaking His message. These kings (2 Kings 3:9) recognized that through Elisha they could hope to hear direction from God.

Elisha wasn't known for speaking the word of the Lord by his own power. He placed himself in a position to wait on God, and then spoke for Him alone. That is why “the hand of the LORD” came on Elisha (v. 15).

Become known for your relationship with God and for obeying Him alone.

Father, I want to be known for speaking Your Word and for my love for You. Show me the areas of my life that don't point toward You. Convict my heart to change my life to honor You more. In Jesus' name, amen.

April 26–May 2. **Danell Steffen** is a wife to Ken and a stay-at-home mom of three girls. They love to hike the Sandia Mountains, play family games, and eat Mexican food. Danell is passionate about women's ministry and discipleship at church and home.

Prayer First, Then Act

Jehoshaphat also said to the king of Israel, “First seek the counsel of the LORD” (1 Kings 22:5).

Scripture: 1 Kings 22:1-6

Song: “Once and for All”

Once the weather turns cold in the fall, I hardly take a step in our house without my slippers on. I hate having cold feet! On a few occasions, however, I have found myself in my car, ready to go somewhere, only to look down and see that I am still wearing those slippers. They are so present in my life, I almost forget I'm wearing them.

When I get into my car without proper footwear, I'm getting ahead of myself. I'm not really prepared for whatever errands I need to run that day. I need to make my preparations before I ever get into my car. Jehoshaphat remembered what the king of Israel did not. Jehoshaphat knew that whatever they did together, they needed to consult God first to see whether they were following Him.

Like me with my slippers, the king of Israel was so used to the presence of sin in his life, he forgot that it was there. It didn't occur to him to consult the Lord. Sin is repulsive at first, but becomes commonplace if it isn't dealt with. Our eyes have to open again to sin, once we have gotten used to it.

Father, make me hungry for Your presence in my life. Please show me the sin I've gotten used to and convict me accordingly. Break my heart for the times that I forget to call on You before I act. In Jesus' name, amen.

Head in the Sand

The king of Israel answered Jehoshaphat, “There is still one prophet through whom we can inquire of the LORD, but I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me, but always bad. He is Micaiah son of Imlah” (1 Kings 22:8).

Scripture: 1 Kings 22:7-14

Song: “Fat Baby”

Reading today’s passage, I can’t help but picture the cartoonish image of an ostrich with its head stuck in the sand. It’s almost comical to imagine the king of Israel refusing to consult a prophet because he is sure he won’t like what the prophet has to say.

The king of Israel wasn’t very concerned with what God wanted him to do. He surrounded himself with people who would tell him exactly what he wanted to hear. At the same time, he had distanced himself from Micaiah so that he could avoid God’s truth. Micaiah would not pay lip service to the king at the expense of the truth.

Today it is easy to stick my head in the sand. I can fill my ears with music, television, and advice from unbelievers. There is so much noise in life that it is easy to miss God’s direction if I don’t seek it. I can miss the chance to be used by Him as a tool for His kingdom and to be blessed by Him.

Father, help me to hear even the hard things You have to say. Help my heart want to obey You. I pray that I will always be ready to hear and do what Your Word commands. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Read Your Map!

“The LORD has put a deceiving spirit in the mouths of these prophets of yours. The LORD has decreed disaster for you” (2 Chronicles 18:22).

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 18:18-22

Song: “One Pure and Holy Passion”

I love to hike, but I always bring a map so I don't get lost. Some trails are marked better than others, so I keep a paper map with me and use a GPS trekking app on my phone. As long as I have service, I can see a small dot on my phone that tells me where I am. If I step off the path, by even a few feet, the dot shows my wayward direction. Trust me, I get back on the path.

It is so evident in this passage that King Ahab should have known that he was not on the Lord's path—because the people he selected to advise him were deceived. Yet even with the Lord's declaration, he refused to listen, repent, and return to God. At his last chance to seek God, Ahab devised his own foolish plan for his protection, which failed (2 Chronicles 18:29, 33).

If I stop looking at my maps for guidance, I put myself in a dangerous situation. I rely on guidance to be safe and successful on my adventures. The Bible, my map for my life, has to be front and center if I want to walk in the center of God's will.

Father, take away any hardness of my heart. Make me sensitive to Your will and keep me hungry for the direction of Your Word. In Jesus' name, amen.

Ahab in Disguise

The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, “I will enter the battle in disguise, but you wear your royal robes.” So the king of Israel disguised himself and went into battle (1 Kings 22:30).

Scripture: 1 Kings 22:29-40

Song: “I Will Follow”

My twin girls have blonde hair, but the similarities in their appearance end there. When they were younger, they loved to dress alike, believing that no one could tell them apart. This is especially funny because one loves to keep her hair short while the other has always kept hers long, and now one twin is also four inches taller!

It seems ridiculous that a person might think he could trick God, but Ahab thought just that. Ahab hoped he would evade God’s judgment of “disaster” (1 Kings 22:23) by disguising himself. A soldier shot an arrow “at random” (v. 34), but God guided that arrow. God can reach any of us, in any way He chooses.

God sees through our fake words, actions, and dress—even when people around us are fooled by the front we put forward. God is not fooled. He knows our thoughts and our innermost hearts. Coming to God means putting away our disguise to come to Him openly. We confess our superficial ways and commit to Him our full and open obedience.

Father, I’m sorry for days when I act as if You can’t see me. I want every one of my actions to honor You just as though I could see You next to me. Grow in me a heart of integrity before You. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Unqualified Praise

In everything [Jehoshaphat] followed the ways of his father Asa and did not stray from them; he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD. The high places, however, were not removed, and the people continued to offer sacrifices and burn incense there (1 Kings 22:43).

Scripture: 1 Kings 22:41-46

Song: “You Love Me Anyway”

Have you ever received praise that had a “but” in it? “I really like your story, but . . .” doesn’t feel quite as good as an unqualified compliment. When I hear such “praise,” I always wonder if they are only saying it in order to offer the criticism in a better way. Either way, I often wish they had kept their words to themselves.

Throughout this week we have watched Jehoshaphat be the king who follows God. He was said to do “what was right in the eyes of the LORD.” Yet look at the heartbreaking word in the next breath: “however.” God is “the God who sees” (Genesis 16:13). Nothing is hidden from Him, yet He still used a somewhat inconsistent Jehoshaphat to guide the nation.

We can go back to Scripture every day to know whether our lives are consistent with what honors God. Without a ruler to measure, we can easily lose sight of what God’s standard is.

Father, show me the “howevers” in my life. Help me to see what is to be removed and help me do that so I can wholeheartedly worship and serve You. Make me hungry for Your Word so that I am consistently measuring myself by the truth. In Jesus’ name, amen.

The Cost of Obedience

The king of Israel then ordered, “Take Micaiah and send him back to Amon the ruler of the city and to Joash the king’s son and say, ‘This is what the king says: Put this fellow in prison and give him nothing but bread and water until I return safely’” (1 Kings 22:26-27).

Scripture: 1 Kings 22:15-23, 26-28

Song: “Is He Worthy?”

I love pistachios and I hate pecans. Both nuts come in a shell that is somewhat difficult to open. For me, one of them is worth the work to get the prize, and the other just isn't.

Micaiah suffers a strong consequence in this story for telling the truth. As a prophet of God, he felt that there was no option but to obey God in speaking the truth. There was really no way that he could have avoided being thrown into prison. The king asked; he answered. It raises a question: Is God worth obeying?

There are many things in life that aren't worth the trouble. However, God is worth it. Regardless of the trouble I encounter in this life, I am assured that the King I serve is worthy. We serve a God who sent His Son to die so that we might be redeemed from our sin. Micaiah would answer the question with a wholehearted “Yes!”

Father, You are so worthy. I may be tempted to make life easier for myself by obeying You only some of the time. Yet You have proven to be worth my obedience so many times. Thank You so much for being worthy! In Jesus' name, amen.

Tough Love

Shouldn't you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been [sexually immoral]? (1 Corinthians 5:2).

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 5:1-5

Song: "They Will Know We Are Christian by Our Love"

The tension in the room hung like a fog. It is still a vivid memory. I watched as the church elders confronted the married couple who had sinned against members of the church.

Church discipline is a stressful, yet beneficial, process for the health of the church. When the body of Christ is infected with the persistent sin of a member, the individual must stop sinning or be put out.

The motivation for discipline is love—tough love. When a church disciplines one of its members, it is to be for the purpose of restoration. As Paul said, the hope is that by barring the sinner from the church, not only will the body of Christ be preserved but the sinner might be restored. We must be sure to correct in love those who need discipline, in accordance with God's Word. Our goal is to restore them as part of the church and strengthen the church to honor God.

Father, help us learn to love others like You love us, even if that requires church discipline. Give us wisdom in this matter. In Jesus' name, amen.

May 3–9. **Timothy Wade** lives in north Texas with his wife, Kara, and their three young children. Tim is a lifelong learner who loves Bible study, reading, writing, and teaching others to pursue God with him. He enjoys spending time with his family, hiking, and fishing.

Establishing Boundaries

“Do not spread false reports. Do not help a guilty person by being a malicious witness. Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong” (Exodus 23:1-2).

Scripture: Exodus 23:1-9

Song: “If You Love Me, Keep My Commandments”

I have a 3-year-old son who is very active. He is a little daredevil who loves heights, jumping before looking, and generally scaring his parents with his young boldness. Because I love him, I constantly tell him to avoid the activities that would hurt him. I caution, “Do not climb the bookshelf” or “Don’t ride your bike down the driveway.” I am thankful to say he is learning to obey such commands.

In this passage from Exodus, God is acting as a loving father by telling His people how they should act. In this particular passage, God is commanding His people regarding what they should not do. Because these commands are offered in the negative, some might not recognize them to be given out of love, but they are.

The love of God is laced throughout the Bible—in both the Old and New Testaments. It does not diminish in the parts of the Bible that offer commands to not do something. God shows His love by offering restrictions, and we love God by following them. God gave us the commands within this passage in Exodus so we might love Him by obeying in everything that He wants us to do, as well as what He does not want us to do.

Father, thank You for loving me so much that You give me warnings and boundaries for my good. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Plans for Your Future

“I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11).

Scripture: Jeremiah 29:10-14

Song: “I Know Who Holds Tomorrow “

The words of Jeremiah 29:11 were emblazoned in many prominent places at the Christian university I attended. The promise gave a frequent reminder that God has a plan for those who belong to Him. The consistent affirmation was good in those days and still is now.

We know the past, we're focused on the present, but some aspects of the future remain unknown. This can make the future a frightening prospect. But the promise God gave to His people in Jeremiah's time still resounds for His people today.

God knows the future of all people. He sees it unfold and has all of it in His hands. Added to His knowledge and dominion is His love for all people. With His love and power, God directs the future for us, His people. When we recognize God's knowledge, receive His love, and seek Him with all our hearts, we learn to trust Him for our future. As we stand at the brink of each moment always moving into the future, we can be sure that God is there with us and that He is working out His plan for each of us. He is our hope for our future.

Father, I praise You for loving me so much that You have a plan for my future. Help me recognize Your grace to trust You each moment. In Jesus' name, amen.

The Danger of Human Traditions

“You [the Pharisees] have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions” (Mark 7:8).

Scripture: Mark 7:1-8

Song: “Create in Me a Clean Heart, O God”

Years ago, another Christian discovered that I did not adhere to a tradition he thought essential. He let me know that he thought I was not a “true Christian.”

He broke fellowship with me over a minor human tradition. I tried to explain that we did not have to agree on everything outside the firm tenets of the faith, but he was not going to hear any of that. It underscored for me that the traditions of man divide but the Word of God unites.

Jesus faced a similar scenario. When the Pharisees and teachers questioned Jesus because He didn't follow the traditions they started, the Lord rebuked them as hypocrites. He condemned them for their superficial religious actions and not understanding the heart of God's law.

The core of Christianity is loving God, and then everyone else. Christians will have different perspectives on minor points, but they are not issues that need divide us. To protect ourselves from the hypocrisy of worshipping Christ with our lips but having our hearts far from Him, we must remain faithful to read and understand Scripture and align our hearts and our lives with the Word. Faithfulness to God's instruction honors our Lord.

Father, forgive me when I follow human traditions before Your Word. Draw me close to You and revive my heart through Your Word that I might honor You. In Jesus' name, amen.

The Whole Story

I will besiege Ariel; she will mourn and lament. . . . But your many enemies will become like fine dust (Isaiah 29:2, 5).

Scripture: Isaiah 29:1-8

Song: “Deliverer”

I have listened to people pull out phrases from the Old Testament, such as those above in today’s passage, to conclude that God is vengeful and cruel. Yes, God speaks with judgment to the people of Jerusalem (Ariel). But then we read about God’s vengeance toward the enemies of Jerusalem (Isaiah 29:5). People who see only God’s anger and judgment are not giving their attention to everything God does. They miss His purpose for discipline.

God has been revealing His holiness, righteousness, justice, and love to all people. We can see these attributes in His righteous judgment of the people in Jerusalem and also of their enemies. The people were lamenting the impending destruction by Sennacherib, king of Assyria, who had surrounded Jerusalem with his army. King Hezekiah called out to God for deliverance (37:14-20). God listened and delivered Jerusalem (v. 36). The direction of God’s judgment changed because of His love.

God hears those who call out to Him, repent of their sin, and ask for His rescue. Jesus received the just punishment of the Father’s judgment that should have been directed at us for all our sin. By turning to Christ in faith and repenting of our sin, we are rescued and no longer face destruction. Do not miss God’s deliverance from the justice you deserve because of your sin.

Father, thank You for showing me Your holiness and for giving Your Son as a sacrifice for my salvation. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Understanding the Word of God

This whole vision is nothing but words sealed in a scroll. And if you give the scroll to someone who cannot read, and say, “Read this, please,” they will answer, “I don’t know how to read” (Isaiah 29:11-12).

Scripture: Isaiah 29:9-12

Song: “Open the Eyes of My Heart, Lord”

I was amazed at how the Bible came to life after I became a Christian. I was understanding it more fully. I had read the Bible before, but reading the Bible as a believer, with the Holy Spirit residing in me, made all the difference for growing deep in His Word.

The false prophets that Isaiah spoke to did not want to hear what God was telling them through Isaiah. They had no desire to truly know God or obey Him, and thus sealed themselves off from the law God gave them. It was as if they made themselves illiterate. But they could understand God’s message through Isaiah; they could hear God’s intent to bring them back into His blessing that comes by faith and obedience.

God wants all people to know and love Him (1 Timothy 2:4). Sincere Bible readers can understand its essential truths about God and their need for Him. God is just and loving toward all. He does not expect what is impossible from anyone. God’s Spirit works in and through the Scripture for our good, even if we are coming from far away spiritually, when we read with desire to know God.

Father, thank You for Your Word. Open our hearts and minds to the truth and goodness in Your Word. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Who Am I?

Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, “You did not make me”? Can the pot say to the potter, “You know nothing”? (Isaiah 29:16).

Scripture: Isaiah 29:13-24

Song: “Behold the Potter and the Clay”

I became a Christian during my teenage years. My faith kept me from several pitfalls that teenagers often tumble into; but I did not allow my faith to help me define my identity or purpose. I doubted myself, my worth, my abilities, and that God had created me for a purpose. I remember praying, “I didn’t ask to be created! Why am I here?” I was the clay questioning the potter.

The prophet Isaiah tells us that we become empty and lose our way when our hearts are far from Him (Isaiah 29:13). To know our purpose, we must first know who our God is and who we are in relation to Him. He is our Creator; we are His creation. This is why He sees us and knows us (v. 15).

Our good response is to humble ourselves, for it is the humble who recognize their need for God and rejoice in Him (v. 19) and gain their life’s direction. Humility that comes out of our deep need for God helps us recognize the work of His hands and how He is shaping the lump of clay that we each are. There is no better place to be on this side of Heaven than in the hands of the potter.

Father, thank You for making me. Help me become the person You desire. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Freedom in Truth

Peter and John replied, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20).

Scripture: Acts 4:13-22

Song: “Not Ashamed”

Jailed often for preaching his beliefs on equality, justice, and peace, George Fox found himself face-to-face with Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell. This commoner’s refusal to bow to anyone but God flew against Britain’s religious, social, and government institutions. Despite considerable persecution, Fox discovered freedom and purpose in his dedication to proclaiming gospel truth. His persistent witness won Cromwell’s respect and set the foundation for the Quaker movement.

How could a few uneducated men like Fox, Peter, and John rattle powerful authorities simply by speaking truth? They merely lived their convictions and told people why. Yet that was enough to shake the very pillars of society.

The Holy Spirit empowers us too in countering corrupt authorities. If we live passionately for God, we make Him evident as our words and deeds manifest His glory. When pressured to be silent, we can live freely under God’s sovereignty, acting boldly and sharing the wonderful things He has done. In the end we will be accountable only to Him, and He will reward our faithfulness.

Father, thank You for the freedom in living boldly in Your truth. In Jesus’ name, amen.

May 10–16. **Megan L. Anderson** is a small-business entrepreneur and dog hostel proprietor. Between desk work and games of fetch, she enjoys teaching Sunday school, drinking Irish Breakfast tea, and cooking for friends.

Our Heavenly Advocate

Irijah would not listen to [Jeremiah]; instead, he arrested Jeremiah and brought him to the officials (Jeremiah 37:14).

Scripture: Jeremiah 37:11-16

Song: “Defender”

After shifts of my cashier job, I carefully counted the money, filled out a ledger, and submitted everything to management. One day a large sum went missing. I was presumed a thief. Though I'd been a faithful employee for years, my reputation and livelihood were at stake. I searched everywhere, asked coworkers for help, and rechecked records. Nothing. Long days of gut-sickening, sinking feelings crawled by. When would it end? How could I prove my innocence? Eventually it came to light that someone misplaced the money after I'd turned it in—and let me take the blame. My name was cleared, and I was promoted.

Though mine was not as dire a circumstance as Jeremiah's, I relate to his shock and uncertainty as Irijah accused and imprisoned him on false charges. But God defends His faithful against even the greatest injustices. Trials may seem never-ending, but God works all things for our good and His glory, advocating for us from His heavenly throne.

We are in the care of the one who is greater than all the powers of this world. When not distracted by vindicating ourselves or seeking revenge, we can fix our attention on God's character and His hand working within our troubles. Trusting God grants us power to turn trials into opportunities for growing stronger in faith. Our Father never leaves His children undefended.

Father, thank You for Your faithfulness amid trials. We place our trust in Your justice. In Jesus' name, amen.

Lighting the Darkness

“I will rescue you on that day, declares the LORD; you will not be given into the hands of those you fear” (Jeremiah 39:17).

Scripture: Jeremiah 38:7-13; 39:1-18

Song: “This Little Light of Mine”

Flickering candlelight of paper lanterns arranged in a cross (and bearing names of those touched by suicide and depression) gleams against the night. Each year neighbors surrounding our church gather with flashlights and walk around town, shining light into the darkness as beacons of hope for anyone feeling trapped in despair. Around the cross, testimonies of healing and support emerge from even the most heartbreaking losses. It is a powerful reminder of God’s steadfast faithfulness and our sacred calling as His messengers to carry Christ’s light into the bleakest places.

Were it not for Ebed-Melek’s vigilance and compassion (Jeremiah 38:7-13), Jeremiah may have starved in that shadowy pit. How must Jeremiah have felt after so long imprisoned alone? What hope must have been inspired by the torchlight piercing the darkness of his cell to reveal a troop come to liberate him! Jeremiah’s rescue wasn’t glamorous. Ebed-Melek had only old rags to offer. But God blessed his faithfulness and promised deliverance from the oncoming battle.

Likewise, God does not require that we be specially equipped to show up for others in their times of need. He only asks that we remain willing and open to His direction. If we live faithfully like Ebed-Melek, God can bless and use us as lanterns carrying the Holy Spirit’s light where it is needed most.

Father, fill us with Your light that we may illuminate this dark world with hope. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Preservation in Conflict

[King Zedekiah asked,] “Is there any word from the LORD?” “Yes,” Jeremiah replied, “you will be delivered into the hands of the king of Babylon” (Jeremiah 37:17).

Scripture: Jeremiah 37:17-21

Song: “O Faithful Lord”

As the country teetered on the brink of civil war, President Abraham Lincoln said, “I know there is a God, and that He hates injustice and slavery. I see the storm coming, and I know that His hand is in it. If He has a place and work for me . . . with God’s help I shall not fail. I may not see the end; but it will come and I shall be vindicated.” Though sticking to his biblical convictions created enemies, Lincoln remained faithful and never gave in to fear of men. As a result, millions of slaves were granted emancipation.

Unlike President Lincoln, King Zedekiah feared mortal enemies more than the God of his salvation, though warned of the consequences. Buckling under pressure of corrupt counselors, Zedekiah condemned not only himself but also his people to slavery and exile. Even so, God worked mercy through him.

Despite Jeremiah’s prophetic wisdom going unheeded and unrewarded, God used Zedekiah’s and others’ wrongs to protect and care for Jeremiah. People may not accept the divine truth we offer either, but we have nothing to fear. God can use even the farthest-strayed heart to work for our good. If we trust and obey God, heeding His Word, He will preserve us through life’s conflicts.

Father, thank You for Your preserving hand in times of trial. May we speak Your truth boldly. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Obeying Wisely

[The officials] said no more to [Jeremiah], for no one had heard his conversation with the king (Jeremiah 38:27).

Scripture: Jeremiah 38:24-28

Song: “Our God”

Levi Coffin’s home became known as the Underground Railroad’s “Grand Central Station,” as he and his wife illegally helped slaves escape captivity. Yet Coffin was never arrested or tried. How? He used his words and influence as a businessman wisely. When confronted by slave catchers, Coffin never denied his abolitionist activities, but never revealed incriminating information either. Though it put him at risk with men, Coffin maintained that while acting on God’s Word, it is always safe to do right.

Similarly, Jeremiah fully trusted God and told the truth when questioned, but proved shrewd enough to conceal the true purpose of his meeting with the king. He wisely used his resources—palace connections, words, and experience—and as a result stayed safe until the city’s fall.

Sometimes it isn’t enough to just obey God’s calling; we must also be wise in how we go about it. As Jesus said, “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16). Those who hold power through evil deeds would destroy those who work for righteousness. If we speak and act carefully with God’s truth, we can accomplish the most good. When we trust God’s protection through hardship, as we faithfully work His will, He is faithful to sustain us.

Father, guide and protect us as we carefully declare Your truth to the world. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Consequences

Now Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon. So . . . Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon . . . encamped outside [Jerusalem] and built siege works all around it (2 Kings 24:20–25:1).

Scripture: 2 Kings 24:20–25:12

Song: “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind”

Harry S. Truman had a difficult decision to make. He could risk prolonging the war with Japan, or he could employ the atomic bomb in hopes of Japan’s swift surrender. Either way, lives hung in the balance. He chose the latter, likely saving countless people at the cost of devastating thousands. Emperor Hirohito announced Japan’s surrender six days after the second bomb.

President Truman acted in his nation’s best interest despite the dramatic consequences that would cement his name in history. Perhaps King Zedekiah feared that heeding Jeremiah’s counsel to surrender to Babylon (Jeremiah 27:12; 38:17) would mark him as a coward. But God made the consequences clear. By caving to his short-term fears instead of trusting God and following His instructions, Zedekiah exacted calamitous long-term consequences on himself and his people.

Decisions can be frightening. We worry about failing others, damaging our reputations, or making matters worse. But God’s counsel is dependable and wise. In the face of tough decisions, we can trust Him to be faithful to keep His promises and lead us safely through troubles. When we disregard His direction, though, He is also dutiful in disciplining us. No matter how shaky our circumstances, there is hope in God’s faithfulness; and we can rely on His Word.

Father, thank You that we can always turn to You for hope and guidance. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Choosing Forgiveness

“[The officers of the king of Babylon] will not hand you over,” Jeremiah replied. “Obey the LORD by doing what I tell you. Then it will go well with you, and your life will be spared” (Jeremiah 38:20).

Scripture: Jeremiah 38:14-23

Song: “Simply Trusting Every Day”

Eva Mozes Kor angered her Jewish community by forgiving Dr. Mengele and the Nazis who experimented on her at Auschwitz. Survivors and their families accused her of undermining the importance of the Holocaust and dishonoring those who were lost. Despite people's berating and her own fears, Kor met with former Nazis and organized pilgrimages to the concentration camp, where she publicly forgave all those involved with her and her family's experiences there.

Kor could have chosen the worldly wisdom of clinging to bitterness for a false sense of power. Instead she dedicated her life to teaching the true power of forgiveness—choosing the divine way, though certainly not the easy way. By doing so, Kor's life was liberated from the oppression of anger and resentment. She was free to experience the joy of her own family as well as fulfillment in her work for the rest of her days.

In the face of life's trials, we have the same choice as King Zedekiah and Eva Mozes Kor. We can plant our trust in God's unfailing instruction, or we can willfully fall prey to this fallen world's distorted wisdom and design our own ruin. We may not avoid disaster, but God will preserve us through it and reward our obedience with complete freedom in Him.

Father, strengthen us to choose Your higher way over our sinful inclinations. In Jesus' name, amen.

Always Show Kindness!

Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge (Deuteronomy 24:17).

Scripture: Deuteronomy 24:14-18

Song: “Make Me a Blessing”

A World War II chaplain encountered a wounded soldier lying on the cold ground. He asked, “Soldier, would you like me to read from the Bible?” “Sir,” the soldier replied, “I am so thirsty. I would rather have a drink of water.”

The chaplain left, but soon returned with water and gave it to the soldier. Observing that the soldier was shivering, the chaplain removed his own overcoat and placed it over him. Then he removed his jacket, rolled it up, and gently placed it under the soldier’s head.

To the chaplain’s pleasant surprise came the soldier’s whispered response: “Sir, if there is something in your Bible that makes you show such kindness, please read it to me.”

Jesus told a story that illustrates the kindness the chaplain showed. It featured the kindness a Samaritan showed to a gravely beaten traveler (Luke 10:30-36).

Jesus’ story demonstrated that the Samaritan did not deprive the wounded traveler of anything—by tending to the victim’s wounds, taking him to an inn, and providing for his recovery.

Jesus affirmed the Old Testament law by saying we should follow the Samaritan’s example (v. 37). The chaplain is also a good example for us.

Father, may we reflect Your love in our treatment of others. In Jesus’ name, amen.

May 17–23. **Jim Dyet** lives in Colorado Springs with his wife of 62 years, Gloria. He is a retired editor and minister, who enjoys daily dog walks.

The God of New Beginnings

“I will watch over them to build and to plant,” declares the LORD (Jeremiah 31:28).

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:27-30

Song: “Have Thine Own Way, Lord”

I was amazed at the artistic talent of potters at Van Briggie Pottery in Colorado Springs when I took my family there to view the beautifully crafted pottery. We watched a skilled artisan plop a shapeless lump of clay onto a potter’s wheel, add water, deftly cradle the clay in his hands, and shape it until it became a beautiful vase. He started with a mental image of the final product and ended with the visible portrayal of that image. If I were to try my hand at pottery, I would surely end up with a lump of mud and dirty hands!

The Bible tells us that God is a potter who takes human lumps of clay and shapes them into brand-new vessels. Jeremiah 18:1-4 tells us that Jeremiah visited a potter’s house, where he saw the potter take a marred clay vessel and form it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.

No matter how marred a person’s life may be, God, the master potter, can transform it into something valuable and beautiful. Ephesians 2:10 identifies Christians as God’s workmanship.

Let’s view every unbeliever as someone who can have a new beginning through God’s creative work. We cannot give anyone a new beginning, but we can introduce others to the only one who can.

Father, we place ourselves in Your hands and trust You to shape us into the image of Your Son. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Crime Doesn't Pay

“Because he [a righteous man’s violent son] has done all these detestable things, he is to be put to death; his blood will be on his own head” (Ezekiel 18:13).

Scripture: Ezekiel 18:10-13

Song: “Amazing Grace”

No one has escaped from the maximum-security prison located in Florence, Colorado. When I played golf at a course that borders the facility, I took a long, hard look and breathed a sigh of relief that I was viewing it from the outside instead of from the inside. Some of the most infamous, violent criminals incarcerated there include Theodore Kaczynski, the Unabomber; Terry Nichols, accomplice in the Oklahoma City bombing; Ramzi Yousef, a perpetrator of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing; and El Chapo, the notorious Mexican drug lord. They will spend the rest of their lives locked up, hopefully knowing that crime doesn't pay.

In a sense, every human being is a criminal in God's eyes. We all have broken His laws and bear the penalty of physical, spiritual, and eternal death (Romans 3:23; 6:23; Ephesians 2:1; Revelation 20:14). However, unlike the prisoners who cannot escape from the prison in Florence, we can be free from the penalty of our sin by trusting in Jesus as our Savior. He said, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). Jesus not only sets us free from sin's penalty but also frees us to live as God wants us to live (Galatians 5:13).

Father, thank You for setting me free from sin's penalty and power. May I show my gratitude every day by doing Your will. In Jesus' name, amen.

Those Sneaky Idols

“[A righteous man] does not eat at the mountain shrines or look to the idols of Israel” (Ezekiel 18:15).

Scripture: Ezekiel 18:14-18

Song: “Whiter Than Snow”

The TV show *American Idol* attracts millions of viewers who find it entertaining to watch contestants perform enthusiastically as they hope to succeed to the next level in their quest of becoming the next American idol. When tryouts were held in my city, eager contestants lined up around the block for their turn to display their talent and be selected for the show. Of course, very few realized the fulfillment of their dream.

Undoubtedly, many of the *American Idol* hopefuls do not worship fame and fortune, but I suspect some do; and TV viewers can idolize the winner of the final *American Idol* contest. Their idol worship differs from bowing down to an idol of wood, stone, or metal, but it is idol worship nonetheless. The worship of a famous singer, actor, sports figure, money, fame, or some material object may not be a conscious form of worship, but it can happen because such idols can sneak into our lives.

When I was a youngster, my idol was golf, and I devoted as much time and effort to it as possible. However, when I became a Christian, like the Thessalonians, I turned from my idol to worship the living and true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9). Although golf is an enjoyable sport, I don't want it or any other idol to sneak back into my life.

Father, You alone are God. May we worship You in spirit and in truth. In Jesus' name, amen.

Something to Smile About

“If a wicked person turns away from all the sins they have committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, that person will surely live; they will not die” (Ezekiel 18:21).

Scripture: Ezekiel 18:19-24

Song: “Happiness Is to Know the Savior”

Rob is confined to a nursing home, but when he could attend church, he entered the building with the help of a walker. I would ask, “Rob, how are you today?” The response was always the same. He would flash a big smile and say, “I’m alive.” There was a time, however, when first responders didn’t think Rob was alive.

Several years ago, a heavily loaded tractor trailer collided head-on with Rob’s car. First responders pried Rob’s broken body from the wreckage and concluded that he was dead. However, a few minutes later they saw a flicker of life and rushed him to a hospital. After weeks of care and rehab, Rob was able to walk with the aid of a walker. So when Rob smiled widely and said “I’m alive,” he was genuinely happy to be alive.

We can smile about the privilege of being alive to spend quality time with our loved ones and friends, but our smile can grow even wider when we turn from our sin, put our faith in Jesus Christ to receive His gift of salvation, and follow Him. Only then will we surely receive the eternal life that the Lord offers us by grace.

Father, thank You for each day You give me to live, and thank You for the offer of Your salvation. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Putting Self-Righteousness to the Test

“The Israelites say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ Are my ways unjust, people of Israel? Is it not your ways that are unjust?” (Ezekiel 18:29).

Scripture: Ezekiel 18:25-29

Song: “Holy, Holy, Holy”

While I was a guest at a fellow golfer’s home, I learned that my host’s daughter and her husband had become believers. However, my friend could not understand why they insisted that his good life didn’t qualify him for Heaven. He asked for my opinion.

I began, “You are a good golfer. Your average score for 18 holes is about 80. Compared to most golfers, you are better than they are. Now, if God played 18 holes, what do you think His score would be? Because He is perfect, wouldn’t His total score be 18?”

My friend smiled. “You’re right, 18!”

“So how does your average score of 80 compare with God’s 18? It falls far short, doesn’t it?” Similarly, when you compare your righteousness to that of many people, you look pretty good, but when you compare it to God’s perfect righteousness, it falls far short. That’s why your good life can’t earn you a place in Heaven. You need to trust in Jesus to get you to Heaven.”

As Christians, we have a place in Heaven because of God’s grace revealed so clearly in Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross.

Father, thank You for showing us that we fall short of Your glory. Thank You for saving us by grace through faith in Your Son Jesus. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Everyone Matters to God

“I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!” (Ezekiel 18:32).

Scripture: Ezekiel 18:1-9, 30-32

Song: “Surely Goodness and Mercy”

While serving as a minister in western New York, I received a call from a funeral director in a neighboring town. He explained that the very unpopular town drunk had died, and he could not find a clergy person who would conduct the funeral. He wondered if I was willing to do so. I assured him I was.

At the appointed time for the funeral, not a single mourner was present. The funeral director and I waited until it was evident that no one would attend the service. “Reverend,” the funeral director said, “no one seems to care about the deceased, so why don’t you say what you planned to say? I’ll sit and listen.”

Perhaps many people pass through life without anybody caring about them. Some people may even be glad when a troublesome person has died. But our Lord cares about everyone, regardless how far he or she has wandered. Jesus told a story about 1 sheep that strayed from a fold of 100. The shepherd cared about the lost sheep, searched for it, found it, laid it on his shoulders, rejoiced, and called his friends and neighbors to rejoice with him. Like the shepherd, we should care about every lost soul and launch a rescue operation.

Father, the world tends to be impersonal and uncaring. May we not grow callous to the need of every lost soul to receive forgiveness and eternal life in Heaven. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Pay Attention to the Signs

Some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from you” (Matthew 12:38).

Scripture: Matthew 12:38-42

Song: “Increase My Faith”

Maddie pondered the mix of addition and subtraction problems on her paper. She squinted her eyes and scratched her head in frustration. Her tutor reminded her that the signs are important. “What signs?” Maddie asked. Her tutor pointed. Maddie stopped guessing answers and began to use the plus and minus signs to guide her thinking.

We might rush through life and overlook the signs we need to see, or maybe we think we already know enough. The Pharisees and scribes wanted another sign even though they had rejected all those already given. They would still refuse to accept Jesus, the Messiah. Getting everything wrong to that point, they refused to accept the one who stood before them. But another, final sign—a sign not to miss—was coming. It would be like the sign of Jonah: Jesus’ crucifixion, burial, and resurrection three days later. This is an event in history to see and accept because it confirms that Jesus is the risen Savior. He gives eternal life and freedom from the bondage of sin to all who will receive.

Father, thank You for sending Your Son, who died and resurrected so that I can live in Your holy presence forever. In Jesus’ name, amen.

May 24–30. **Melody Roberson** lives in southeast Texas. She is a special-education teacher who enjoys spending time with her family and mentoring youth at her church.

No Greater Love

“The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and now something greater than Jonah is here” (Luke 11:32).

Scripture: Luke 11:29-32

Song: “No Greater Love”

Linda remembers yelling “You don’t love me. You are the worst mother ever!” as she stormed out of the kitchen. That was also the first time that Linda saw tears stream down from her mother’s eyes. That evening, Linda felt remorse for what she had yelled at her mom. She also realized her mother wouldn’t allow her to go out with her friend because that friend was not a good influence. Linda now knows that her mother’s words and tears were evidence of her love.

God demonstrated His love and grace for the people in Nineveh through the judgment and deliverance Jonah preached. It was a harsh message, but they listened and repented. God showed mercy (Jonah 3). The Father sent His Son as the greatest evidence of His love. Jesus warned the Jews that they were not listening or responding to the Father’s love as well as the Gentiles in Nineveh had done. That is why such Gentiles were in a superior position to these Jews—an idea completely abhorrent to them.

God’s judgment will be real. It is important to recognize God’s love while we have time. It is because of His love that He guides us, protects us, and saves us. Do not miss the gift of God’s love for you in Jesus.

Father, thank You for Your great love for me. Help me see Jesus more clearly. In His name, amen.

Why Are You Running?

Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish (Jonah 1:3).

Scripture: Jonah 1:1-12

Song: “Lay Down My Pride”

Sara sat in her parked car crying and telling herself, *I am done with this marriage. I'm packing up and leaving. That man doesn't deserve me.* But she knew deep within that this was the wrong way to respond to another marital conflict. And working up resolve to leave became more difficult as she thought about her wedding commitment to love. She got out of her car with a decision to go back into the house and try to manage her anger and talk with her husband. That night, 20 years ago, became one of many steps toward a renewed marriage built on devotion and commitment.

Jonah was God's prophet called to speak for God. He had accepted that call, but when it came to speaking to Nineveh, Jonah abandoned his God and his call because of his anger. The people of Nineveh were Gentiles and a dangerous enemy of Israel. Most Jews, and probably Jonah, hated them. Jonah let his anger direct his life.

Anger hinders hearing God's Word and obeying it. It can harden us against God's love and against proper behavior toward others. Naming and managing our anger is not always easy, but doing both can help us admit our need to ask God for help. Asking for help, before we do the wrong thing, can lead us to peace within ourselves and goodness for others around us.

Father, please help me manage my anger so I can love others as You do. In Jesus' name, amen.

Responding to Mercy

[The sailors] took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him (Jonah 1:15-16).

Scripture: Jonah 1:13-16

Song: “Our God Is Mercy”

Kate was a teenager when she snuck out of the house one night to join a group of friends. She was the only one with a license. While driving, her attention drifted toward her friends, and the car ran off the road and rolled down an embankment. Everyone was able to climb out of the car with only cuts and bruises. Scared but grateful, Kate recognized God’s mercy for her, despite the consequences that would come for her decision.

Because of His mercy for Jonah and the people of Nineveh, God protected Jonah so he could still turn around toward obedience and the task God gave Jonah in the first place.

God has shown all of us His mercy. It is up to each of us to recognize what He offers and to respond with obedience that goes beyond ritualistic attempts to appease Him. God calls us to fear Him and receive His love that leads us to confession of our sin, repentance, and daily devotion to Him and the instruction in His Word. God makes His mercy available as long as we have breath. Each day gives us more opportunity to recognize His mercy and respond in faith.

Father, thank You for Your mercy that invites me to live in Your love and devote myself to follow Your Word. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Sharing God's Love

“I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity” (Jonah 4:2).

Scripture: Jonah 4:1-5

Song: “Mighty to Save”

Ten years ago Michelle received another unsatisfactory performance review at her job and was told that if she did not make significant changes quickly, she would be let go. The failure was due to her addiction to alcohol—the same reason most of her friends were abandoning her. She was not showing up when she said she would, was not following through on her commitments. One of her few remaining friends listened to Michelle complain about her situation on one of her few sober evenings. That friend helped Michelle realize that even though she felt rejected and defeated, God had not rejected her. She could return to God for help.

Jonah eventually went to the people of Nineveh and warned them that God was about to reject them if they did not repent (Jonah 3:3-5). Out of compassion, God gave them time and watched for their response (v. 10).

God is slow to become angry, but He will not tolerate sin forever. He is watching for all who will come to Him for help and mercy. He is ready to show compassion. We can share the love of God with others by sending them a message that can change their lives. No matter how far down or far away from God someone is, they are not fully lost.

Father, thank You for Your great compassion. Help me share Your love with people around me. In Jesus' name, amen.

God Provides

The LORD God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant (Jonah 4:6).

Scripture: Jonah 4:6-11

Song: “Provider”

After paying for a new furnace, money was tight. Emmy's mom wondered how she was going to also pay her daughter's college fees. She went up to the attic, where it would be quiet, to pray. As she kneeled down, she noticed a tin box that she had not seen before. It had “Emmy's College” written on the top. Inside the box were several \$100 bills left by her late husband, who had passed away years earlier. Recognizing the money as God's provision, she praised Him for knowing and meeting her need.

Jonah was glad for the shade plant but did not recognize that God had provided it, nor did Jonah thank Him for it. Jonah is not a good model for us. But we can be different by opening our eyes, minds, and hearts to perceive God's goodness for us. He knows what we need for life (Matthew 6:31-32) and also what we need for godliness (2 Peter 1:3). He is able to meet all our needs. Our part is to remain alert and receptive to notice His provision for our lives and to recognize His work to grow our faith. Then we thank Him for His presence and respond to His work in our lives.

Father, thank You for providing for my physical and spiritual welfare. Help me to see Your work in my life. In Jesus' name, amen.

Simply Repentance

“Let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish” (Jonah 3:9-10).

Scripture: Jonah 3

Song: “Heart of God”

Jonah was reluctant to go where God sent him (Jonah 1:3). When he eventually did go, his message was very short (3:4). From what Scripture says, Jonah didn't seem to help the people know how to avoid God's judgment. He was reluctant to lead Nineveh to God or help the people grow in relationship with Him. These were parts of a prophet's job that Jonah didn't do.

The king listened to Jonah and feared God. And while the king was uncertain of the outcome, he at least said “Who knows?” (3:9) and led the people into hope. And he was right. God requires a repentant and humble heart (Isaiah 30:15; Ezekiel 18:32). Encouragement to repent is the core of the real prophetic message. Wearing sackcloth and sitting in the dust (Jonah 3:6) were the king's decisions for outward expressions of the sincere confession and repentance that God saw during the 40 days of watching and waiting (v. 4).

Trust in God and repentance that moves us into faith and steady, consistent obedience are what God requires from everyone.

Father, thank You for the opportunity to return to You in faith and repentance today. In Jesus' name, amen.

A Reputation for Truth

The servant replied, “Look, in this town there is a man of God; he is highly respected, and everything he says comes true” (1 Samuel 9:6).

Scripture: 1 Samuel 9:5-10

Song: “Take My Life and Let It Be”

Often in television courtroom dramas, we hear the prosecuting or defense attorney try to discredit a witness of the opposing side. The same thing probably happens in real courtrooms (minus the dramatic background music). A little lie or a forgotten indiscretion is revealed, and the testimony of a witness becomes useless. The seed of doubt about that person’s integrity is planted. Everything he says is suspect.

According to today’s Scripture, Samuel did not have that problem. He was referred to as a man of God, highly respected, and a teller of truth. People trusted what Samuel said. He spoke God’s truth when it made people feel good. He spoke God’s truth when it hurt. He spoke God’s truth when it went against public opinion and made people angry.

Like Samuel, we can be people of God’s truth—accurately conveying the message of His Word. We can also testify about what God has done in our lives. And we must be people of our word—living with integrity that backs up our testimony and gives honor to Him.

Father, help us daily to live lives of integrity that glorify You and Your Son. In His name we pray, amen.

May 31. **Wanda B. Pelfrey**, a retired preschool teacher, lives and writes inspirational mysteries with her retired minister husband, Danny, in Georgia.

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