**2020 Sunday Musings Compilation**

**Relationship With God**

By Tanya Walker

The focus of the Gospel is relationship with God. Our God is a relational God who created us out of the overflow of loving relationship within the Trinity, and who intended us for perfect relationship with Him throughout eternity. The culmination of the Christian narrative is a wedding feast, a marriage. Christ the bridegroom and us His bride, the Church.

When we look to heaven, as John 14 makes so beautifully clear, we are not looking for a where—a place, somewhere far away where we will be well. We are looking to a who—the person of God, and the wonder and joy and fulfillment of relationship with Him.

The Bible is full of the expression of God’s relational heart toward us—as a Father, a husband, a friend—and it carries through from Genesis to Revelation.

When in the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve turn their backs on God and rebel against Him, we see immediately the tone is set for the rest of the ages, as God’s response is not ‘What have you done?’ but ‘Where are you?’1 And the whole of the rest of the story is God winning us back, paying the price Himself, making a way for us to be with Him.

It is a great love story, an epic adventure of a lover pursuing His bride. God Himself wooing and pursuing mankind. It is a breathtaking reality that we are inundated, in the Word of God, by His call for us to live in relationship with Him… 1 John 3:1 rings out with joy: “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!”

The biblical emphasis is on a God who has revealed Himself: through nature, through the Scriptures, and ultimately through the living Word—the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus looks to His disciples and says to them that in knowing Him, they know the Father, and that knowing Him is to have eternal life. The self-revelation of God is a foundation point for Christian theology and the basis on which our security lies. It is one of the most profound truths of the Christian message, that whilst we may at times be in the dark about what God is doing, we are not in the dark about God.

What makes this even more wonderful is that knowing Him is not simply a matter of abstract possibility, but of God’s own heart desire, as He speaks through Jeremiah: “I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart.”

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**TIME FOR A CAREER SWITCH?**

By Chris Hunt

January is often when people look for a new job—as many as two in five people are actively job hunting in the first month of the year. For some, this might be a sideways shift into a similar role; others might consider a radical career change.

If you have been working in a similar role for years, you may wonder if you could ever step out and do something completely different. Some people do, and not only in January. Take Andrea Bocelli, the popular Italian tenor and singer-songwriter, who made the jump from being a lawyer to his musical career. Justin Welby left his executive position in the oil industry to become a vicar, and eventually the Archbishop of Canterbury and symbolic head of the worldwide Anglican Communion. Brian Cox, the popular physicist who presents science on English television, was a rock star, with a number 1 hit in the 1990s. Harrison Ford, the Hollywood actor, used to be a carpenter and cabinet-maker.

Such stand-out changes might not be within the realm of our own possibilities, but the New Year is as good a time as any to examine how satisfied we are with what we’re doing, and how confident we feel about the direction we are heading. Waking up on a Monday morning dreading the beginning of the working week, or feeling like our talents are not being used, or that our pay package doesn’t reflect the value we bring, may be signs it’s time to think about other options. If this isn’t how you feel that’s fine and life-changing decisions shouldn’t be made in a hurry, of course, but you might like to consider the following:

* **List five features of your ideal job** that are most important to you, such as your fulfillment and goals, the ethics of your employer, the size of your salary, the supplementary benefits (pension, gym membership, etc.), the workplace environment and camaraderie, the hours and workload, your role and level of responsibility, the use that’s made of your unique talents, the opportunities for training and career progression, and so on.
* **Now score your present job** on those features. If it doesn’t match at least half of what is most important to you, chances are you are not in the best place and it’s time to start looking elsewhere.
* **Think about what you really want to do**. Read up about the role. Does it fit your skills and experience, training and qualifications? If not, is it something you can learn on the go, or is there another route into that type of job? Do some research.
* **Get advice from other people**. According to Proverbs, “The more wise counsel you follow, the better your chances.” Try to get some advice from those already in the field where you’d like to be working. Talk to your friends and family, and perhaps a career advisor.
* **Go after your dreams**, but be realistic. The vast majority of us have jobs because we need them in order to pay the bills. So if your dream career isn’t quite within striking distance and you need to stick with your regular job, consider a voluntary role in the sector where you are interested. If it’s something you really are passionate about, you’ll probably be able to fit in a few evenings or a day over the weekend. An accountant won’t become a social worker overnight, but he could help out at a youth club.
* **Seek God’s guidance**. “Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take.” You may find Him speaking to you through your quiet time, devotional, or Bible reading, or you may want to specifically ask Him: “Show me Your ways, O Lord; teach me Your paths.” Whatever the case, try to include Him in the picture of your plans, remembering that “God’s blessing makes life rich,” not only materially, but also in terms of peace of mind.

January is just one month. Your own season for change might not come at this particular time of the year, yet whenever it comes, God will be at hand to help, shining His light on your path.

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**TELEPORTATION—OR TRANSFORMATION**

By Chris Mizrany

Some years ago, a friend and I were on an overnight bus trip to another part of South Africa. We stowed our bags, connected our headphones, and braced ourselves for the long uncomfortable hours ahead. Before the journey began, I remember thinking *I wish teleporters existed, and we didn’t have to waste all these hours just to get somewhere.* Little did I suspect what was coming.

About halfway through the trip—just after 2 am, the bus broke down, and the driver announced our journey was placed on indefinite “pause.” Mechanics would be arriving, but exactly *when* was a little hazy, as we were in the middle of nowhere. Some of us decided to file out and stand outside, stretching our legs and breathing the crisp air. I was extremely frustrated, and even a bit upset, with God for allowing the bus to break down. I paced up and down in the darkness, feeling sorry for myself.

Then I heard the singing, a low melodic rumble welling up from somewhere in the group of passengers. It rose up in a beautiful rhythm, clear and utterly joyous. Then another voice joined in, then another, then a few more. Before long, many of us were singing along, our woeful thoughts unexpectedly carried away by the tunes of camaraderie and a thankful song.

My friend grabbed my arm, “Look up!” she said, pointing to the sky. What a glorious view—stars without number covering the expanse and shining serenely and brightly without competition from city lights, as if to say, *It will all work out.* As we stood and stared and sang, I regretted my earlier griping and remembered a quote I’d once read: “One man sees the mud, the other sees the stars.”

And I realized I didn’t really wish for teleporters after all. I decided to thrive in the moments—both the good and the less good—thankful for what I have and taking time to experience the little joys of life. With the song of salvation in my heart and the twinkles of blessings around me, I can face every day with anticipation.

And yes, the bus was repaired and we continued on in our journey, but more than that, I was changed. On that starry night in the middle of nowhere, I was reminded that my Lord is everywhere.

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**Eating Together**

By Curtis Peter

Not so long ago, the various members of our family had different schedules, and as a result, we were seldom able to eat together. I couldn’t help feeling that our family was drifting apart—especially since visiting an Italian friend who taught me what a joy “breaking bread” together can be.

A meal in an Italian home is an event. It’s not about grabbing a quick bite on the run; rather, it’s a time to swap stories, to chat, to debate, to share hopes and wishes. Then, just when you think the meal is finished, another delicious dish is set in front of you. Before you know it, two hours have gone by, and maybe many more. No need for any other evening entertainment; the meal is an event in itself.

We may not often have the opportunity to indulge in an Italian-style feast, but even in our busy lives, surely we can find a way to share a meal. There is a lot of research that supports the benefits of families eating together. The opportunity to talk over a meal strengthens bonds, creating warmth, security, and a sense of belonging. A home-cooked meal is likely to be more nutritious and cheaper than fast food. Younger members of the household learn manners—asking to pass food, not putting elbows on the table, and eating slowly all contribute to the pleasant experience. Language skills are reinforced as we listen and tell stories around the table. Eating together also increases the whole household’s awareness of food preparation—another great way of giving the children a good start in life.

No matter the composition of your household—even if you’re alone—taking time to stop and enjoy your food is going to be good for your digestion and emotional well-being. Meals are also a great time to pray for our specific needs and show appreciation to God for what He’s done.

My visit to Italy has inspired me to commit to calling our family together at mealtimes as often as possible. What we get is a lot more than just the food. We receive bonds of love, joy, and togetherness that will last.

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[**The Glory of Easter**](https://tfionline.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8548880017562dc56a0e55ca8&id=b5f29f6e1c&e=c472f1e780)

ByIrena Zabickova

I have always loved Easter. For me, the season of Easter has invariably been set in a beautiful atmosphere of newness, as winter gives way to spring and nature is busting at the seams with new growth, flowers are smiling with colorful joy, and the birds can’t stop singing their cheerful tunes. New life and new hope have always been a major part of this special holiday.

When I met Jesus, a new depth of the Easter season opened up to me. A new world was revealed: one that is not dependent on what season of the year it happens to fall on or what the weather is like. A world free from sin and transgressions. A new life in Jesus. Peace, love, happiness, and His constant presence. And the gift of eternal life.

John said it very simply, “But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:31\*). Praise God! What a beautiful, magnificent piece of news that is! In Him we have life! What freedom, what liberation His sacrifice on the cross means for us! (\*NKJV used for scriptures quoted throughout.)

Then I learned of the next amazing truth that came with the Easter happenings. God didn’t only provide for the salvation of our souls and the gift of eternal life. That in itself would have already been worthy of praise and thanksgiving! But in His love, God knew that our bodies are broken and sick and need fixing, and so Jesus’ body was broken for our healing. During the excruciating hours of torture and suffering prior to His crucifixion, Jesus gave His body for our bodies so we could be healed. “Who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sin, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed” (1 Peter 2:24, quoting Isaiah 53:5).

So, Easter comes with a complete message: we are made whole in body, mind, and spirit. In its brevity it’s a very simple message, yet in its completeness it’s such a deep matter that a human brain can scarcely grasp its meaning. It’s a great topic to meditate on so the Lord can make it come alive for us personally. As we open our hearts and minds to Him, He might reveal to us some things that can give us some “aha” moments—from His heart straight to ours. Just as after His resurrection He showed Himself to His disciples and answered their many questions and explained things they didn’t understand, so He can explain and reveal to us personally new jewels and pearls of His heavenly knowledge and wisdom that we may have been missing. “And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45).

And yet, the Easter story doesn’t end with our praise and meditation. There is one more thing attached to all these events—telling others! When Jesus was resurrected, He showed up to His disciples. He took time to explain to them what happened, answer their questions, and encourage them. And then He sent them to tell others. “So Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you’” (John 20:21).

Luke writes, “And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47).

In Mark we find the often-quoted verse, “And He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature’” (Mark 16:15).

Matthew ends with this powerful crescendo, “And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’ Amen” (Matthew 28:18–20).

So this Easter let’s take some time to commemorate and celebrate the wonderful news of Jesus’ resurrection, and give Him praise for His priceless gift of a new life in Him. Let’s show Him our thankfulness for His gift of healing for our whole being, including our bodies. Let’s give Him time to speak to us and show us new things and revelations. And at the same time, let’s remember the Great Commission we were given, and keep sharing this Good News with others!

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**The Violin and the Broken String**

There is a story, versions of which can be found on several websites, about the world-famous violinist Itzhak Perlman. It illustrates a beautiful principle about God’s grace and power, how He can take whatever we have to offer Him in this life and make it into something beautiful. I’d like to recount it for you.

Itzhak Perlman was playing to a packed house one evening when, in the middle of a piece, that sound, dreaded by every violinist on stage, pierced the air—the sound of a violin string breaking!

The suspense in the air was palpable as the orchestra stopped, waiting to see what Itzhak would do. But rather than calling for a different violin, he paused for a moment and signaled for the conductor to continue with the piece; as he took on what most would say was an impossible task: to play a complex piece of music on a violin with only three strings. He played with passion and power and seemed to somehow be reworking the notes in his head as he played. When he finished, there was a stunned silence followed by a roar of applause and cheering from both the audience and the other musicians.

Itzhak Perlman had been no stranger to challenges in his life, having been struck down as a child with polio that had left him permanently in leg braces and on crutches. Amid the cheers he struggled to his feet and motioned for the audience to quiet down. Then he humbly said, “You know, sometimes it is the artist’s task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left.”

As I pondered this story, it reminded me of the gifts we have in this life and how they come in all forms and shapes and sizes. Some seem obvious: the beautiful voice, the highly skilled gymnast, the brilliant musician, the computer genius, and so many others. But how often do we stop to think about those other gifts that also fill the lives of so many—the blindness that develops other senses to such a degree that the person is able to accomplish even greater feats, or the weakness of body that with God’s love creates a supernatural tenderness, a compassion and wisdom in someone that is able to turn the lives of countless others around and bring them new hope, direction, and joy?

Life is filled with blessings (things we see as good) and setbacks (things we see as bad), but whatever we face, when we do it with God’s help, it becomes an opportunity to use what we have in order to create something wonderful.

Itzhak’s comprehension of how to turn defeats into greater accomplishments didn’t just happen by chance. He chose to turn his own lifelong suffering into a tool for good that then became a passion to see every obstacle as an opportunity to go even further. His own physical struggles produced a humility that helped to shield him from the corruption of pride, even in the areas where he was highly accomplished.

All those things were gifts that could be shared with others through his example. Too often people turn to victimization in today’s world, blaming everyone and everything else, even God. The better choice is to use the things we possess in order to develop qualities that can enable us to shine brightly with His love where we are.

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**THREE LIVES**

I love biographies. Historical movies, books, and even web posts are a great way to get a bird’s-eye view of a life. Through their commendable or detestable examples, we have the benefit of seeing how a life develops and how it ends—either in fame, shame, or maybe obscurity.

Sometimes the plot goes places that no fiction writer would dare go. One such example is Lilias Trotter (1853–1928). When I saw a recent documentary of her life entitled Many Beautiful Things, I was touched by her dedication and commitment to stay true to her convictions. She turned down fame and success as a renowned artist to live a life of relative obscurity, spending 40 years in Algeria helping women learn a skill that would enable them to have a better life. She didn’t bury her creative talents, because her art blossomed while she was in Algeria, but she wasn’t doing it for her own glory or the way that some of the art experts of her day wanted her to. Lilias created art because she loved observing nature and people, and she wanted to share that passion with others.

Her diaries are full of illustrations and notes of what she learned from people and nature: “The daisies have been reading me a faith lesson,” and “The milky looking glacier torrent spoke with God’s voice.” Lilias’ writings show that she was enthralled with the adventure of living, learning, and adapting to a new culture and language. She loved what she was doing. Her final statement was, “I was more alive and had more joy and more creativity and richness than if I had stayed in London.”

God had called her to do something hard in leaving her comfort zone, but she reveled in the adventure of it all. Her impact isn’t only measured in her art, but also in the ripple effects on the women’s lives she touched. Sometimes it seemed that she was just pouring water onto the dry sand without seeing any fruit. But in the desert, there are underground rivers of water. Trees tap into this resource by growing their roots deep. Lilias was like that tree, with faith that ran deep.

Lilias’ art remained mostly buried in the basements of private collections and museums until art historians recently brought her life to light. But if success is counted in lives changed and improved circumstances for others, Lilias Trotter was eminently successful, and the impact she had is still being felt today.

In stark contrast was another docudrama I saw called Narcos, about the life of Pablo Escobar (1949–1993), the Colombian cocaine baron and narco-terrorist. Although he was the wealthiest criminal in history, with an estimated worth of 55 billion dollars (in today’s value), he was a pauper spiritually. Like Jesus said, “Don’t store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.”

The futility of Pablo Escobar’s riches can be vividly seen in the fact that 10% of all his cash was eaten by rodents and written off as spoilage. When he was hiding from law enforcement, he burned stacks of bills just to keep warm, and in the end, his wealth was turned over to the Colombian government.

Besides the futility of his wealth, consider the death and destruction that Escobar left in his wake. Thousands died in the mayhem, and during his reign as “King of Coke,” Colombia was dubbed the murder capital of the world. The negative impact of those lives lost and ruined is incalculable.

But even here, there is a ray of hope. Pablo’s son, Juan Pablo Escobar Henao, has tried to reach out to the victims of his father’s rage through a documentary film, as well as personally. He has apologized on behalf of his father to the Colombian people and any who have suffered from the sins of his father. Instead of throwing fuel on the fire and seeking revenge, Pablo’s son seeks to follow God’s admonitions to seek reconciliation through forgiveness from those we have wronged and to forgive those who have wronged us.

Three very different life stories and three legacies. How will we play our role, and what legacy will we leave?

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**Love**

In modern English, the word “love” conveys a range of emotions, but the classical Greeks were more precise. They had four words that have all been translated as “love” in English:

*Storgē* roughly fits our English word “affection,” especially the type of affection within families. It can also be used in a “put up with” type of way—and as most of us know, that is in fact the type of love many of us had for our siblings when growing up.

*Philíos* was used for a general type of virtuous, dispassionate love—the type that inspires loyalty. Today, it’s an equivalent of “friendship.”

*Éros* was a passionate love, the kind that exists in a healthy marriage or intimate relationship. Socrates had a famous debate about *éros* with his students, which was recorded in Plato’s *Symposium*. Plato refined the idea to be not so much love of a person, but love of the beauty in a person. This is where we get the idea of a platonic relationship, which is a love relationship devoid of sexual overtones.

The Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament completed before the time of Jesus—used the verb *agápao* frequently to describe all sorts of love, from divine pity to erotic passion. And it was in that same work that the derivative noun *agape*, the fourth word for love, made its first appearance in Greek literature to describe the deepest kind of love, such as in the *Song of Songs*, which is attributed to Solomon and thought to be evocative of the relationship between God and believers.

The New Testament writers used *agape* around 250 times to describe this highest ideal of love. In addition to the English word “love”—such as in *Theos agápe estin*, “God is love” (1 John 4:8)—the King James translators sometimes chose the English word “charity” (for instance in 1 Corinthians 13). This was meant to reinforce the idea that *agape* is a selfless, giving, and unconditional love.

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**31 Cents**

By Frank Steele

Wow, that’s a lot of money, I thought. Well, relatively speaking. I walk through my neighborhood for errands and exercise, and I’ll often spot coins on the sidewalk or street, which I pick up. The coins are usually pennies, but I’m not one to turn down money, even if it’s pennies. Occasionally I’ll find a nickel or a dime. But today, while taking a route I’d never been on before, I’d come across quite a few coins—31 cents in all. It felt like I’d hit the jackpot.

The next day I did my weekly shopping early, which was unusual for me. Standing in the checkout line, unloading my cart, I noticed a man behind me in line. All he had in his cart was a carton of eggs. After I paid and was bagging my groceries, the man gave the cashier a handful of change for his eggs. She patiently counted it out, and I heard her say, “I’m afraid you’re 31 cents short.”

As it turns out, I just happened to have those 31 cents! I dug in my pocket, gave the cashier the balance needed, and the man had his eggs. He gave me a shy smile and nod as he left, and I said a few parting words to him. And as I walked home, I thought about God’s foresight and wonderful ways.

I’m very much a creature of habit; I do certain things at certain times and have certain places I walk. But I’d broken my routine in walking a new route, where 31 cents was waiting for me. Next, I went shopping at an unusual time, but it was God’s perfect time for me to be able to help the man behind me with just the amount of money he needed. The Lord’s foresight and behind-the scenes planning of the smallest details of our lives is just amazing!

I would have paid the few extra cents for the man’s eggs whether I’d found that change or not. I’m sure God knew that, but it was as if He were saying, Here, I’m paying you back in advance for what you will give for the eggs anyway. In this case, it was only 31 cents, a seemingly insignificant amount, but God knows what His children will go through, He loves them and cares for them, and He supplies for the needy and rewards the giver.

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**Patience**

By William McGrath

Throughout the Bible the virtue of patience and its rewards are spoken about, and you also find examples of the sad results of impatience. Tolerance, endurance, forbearance, and the ability to remain kind toward others who may not have been so kind to you can all be qualities that tie into being patient.

It seems I need to be reminded on almost a daily basis that I need to learn to be more patient. So many little tasks that I feel capable of doing get a monkey wrench thrown in or are laid on the shelf altogether due to some unforeseen circumstance. Over and over again, when I set out to do some errand or to begin a work project, I run into complications that put a damper on the whole thing, trying my patience. Delayed traffic, lines for little business transactions, tracking down some car part, the list goes on. Sometimes other people will request my help just when I’m in the middle of making that long-awaited progress that I thought was so important.

These little things tempt me to feel a bit impatient and a bit resentful. But I wonder if these might be what God uses to help develop my character, to teach me to let patience do its work? Might He have different and more important goals for me that I might easily overlook and not include on my to-do list? He surely sees the need for more refining of my character.

I hope to learn how to take these setbacks in stride and even use them as reminders to accept and yield to His plans more cheerfully. Who am I, really, to feel I have a right to get impatient or resentful about the delays He allows, when He has done so much for me? I know it’s a privilege to invite Him in to be my pilot in everything. What could be better than being willing to let go of my own projects to partner with Him on His projects?

Perhaps these little delays may also work toward developing a higher level of patience, to prepare me for greater opposition, or greater affliction, or greater loss that only He knows may come in the future.

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**Over Come Evil With Good**

By Marie Péloquin

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”—Romans 12:211

It’s interesting that the apostle Paul wrote the verse “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” to the Christians in Rome, because there are some obvious similarities between the social climate of first-century Rome and that of much of the world of today.

Evil was rampant in Rome, and its pull was strong. The Roman Empire hadn’t become the undisputed ruler of the Western world through compassion, kindness, or humility. Wealth was in the hands of a few, and they used it to control the rest. The rich and powerful lived extravagantly while the masses struggled to survive. Perversions and debauchery were practiced by some and ignored by others.

Christianity was just one religion and Christ just one more deity. Considering the pantheon of gods that the Romans worshipped, it must have been difficult to convince anyone that Jesus was “the way, the truth, and the life.” Starting to sound familiar?

It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the evil in the world. Every day we hear about another horrible crime being committed. Meanwhile, the popular media searches for new and more horrific ways to portray violence, perversion, and all manner of evil. Whether it’s a case of art imitating life or vice versa, life has lost its sanctity in the minds of many. What can we do about a world so overcome with evil?

This was the same dilemma that the Christians in Rome faced, and Paul’s counsel to them rings true today. “Overcome evil with good.” If a dish is dirty, being angry about the situation does nothing to fix it. Neither does trying to ignore it. The only solution is to expose that dirty dish to the power of a little soap and water.

If a room is dark, you can curse the darkness or whine over how unpleasant it is—or you can flip the light switch or open the curtains and let some light in. It’s the same with society’s evils. We can get discouraged, angry, or depressed—“overcome by evil”—or we can be a force for good, even if only through personal example.

Not every dirty dish will be cleaned, and not every darkened heart will be enlightened, but we can each do our part day by day, person by person, decision by decision.

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**Easter Thoughts**

This is a quote from Phillip Yancey to think about. There are two ways to look at human history, I have concluded. One way is to focus on the wars and violence, the squalor, the pain and tragedy and death. From such a point of view, Easter seems a fairy-tale exception, a stunning contradiction in the name of God. That gives some solace, although I confess that when my friends died, grief was so overpowering that any hope in an after-life seemed somehow thin and insubstantial.

There is another way to look at the world. If I take Easter as the starting point, the one incontrovertible fact about how God treats those whom he loves, then human history becomes the contradiction and Easter a preview of ultimate reality. Hope then flows like lava beneath the crust of daily life.

This, perhaps, describes the change in the disciples’ perspective as they sat in locked rooms discussing the incomprehensible events of Easter Sunday. In one sense nothing had changed: Rome still occupied Palestine, religious authorities still had a bounty on their heads, death and evil still reigned outside. Gradually, however, the shock of recognition gave way to a long slow undertow of joy. If God could do that for them He can do that for any of us.

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**Easter on a *personal level***

Someone was sharing this story with me and I thought it might be helpful to share it with you.

“I was talking to these young men and the conversation came up about Easter. So I had the idea of relating Easter on a *personal level*. I told them: “Okay, so on Friday we mark the day by remembering Jesus’ death on the cross for us, right? Then we have Holy Saturday, and finally Easter Sunday. Right?

“Some of you may feel like you’re a Friday: you’re dead, you have no hope, you’re too bad for Jesus. All is lost. “Or maybe you are like a Saturday: you feel like you don’t know. You think you do okay, you think you’re a good person. You go to church, or you read the Bible sometimes, but you don’t really have a connection to Jesus. You don’t know personally that He loves you.

“Well, I have great news for you! Jesus is just around the corner! Easter is on Sunday! And you can have an Easter resurrection in your heart. You can dedicate or rededicate your life to Christ right now, today! Anything you think is old or dead or ugly about yourself, you have the power to change if you invite Jesus into your heart and experience His love.

“There we were, talking about the Lord, as these guys had a bottle of beer in one hand, and a cigarette in the other. These seven young men then decided to give their hearts to Jesus. They put everything down, we bowed our heads, and said a short but heartfelt prayer.”

No matter what day you are feeling like, you can have an Easter resurrection too if you want a personal relationship with Jesus. Just ask Jesus to forgive you for your sins and to come into your life.

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**Debt free**

Sérgio was going through a severe financial crisis. He had taken out a large loan in a foreign currency, but a wild fluctuation in the exchange rate had raised his debt to more than double the value of everything he possessed.

Sérgio’s main creditor was his father-in-law, a very wealthy man. One day he told Sérgio, “I know you’re going through rough times, and I want to help you. You don’t have to continue the monthly payments on the money you borrowed from me. Actually, I’d like to forgive the debt altogether.”

That would have given Sérgio enough financial leeway to renegotiate his other debts and keep his company afloat, but Sérgio refused the offer.

“I can’t let you do that, sir. It’s a matter of principle. I must pay back all I owe you.”

The old man tried to reason with his son-in-law. “What you’ve been paying monthly doesn’t even cover the interest on the money I loaned you. Besides, you are married to my only daughter. When I die—and it won’t be long—all I have will be hers and yours. This is not a matter of principle, but stupid pride.”

However, Sérgio stubbornly continued in his futile attempts to restore to his father-in-law what he had borrowed from him. In the end, Sérgio went bankrupt and lost his company and almost everything else.

Of course, we should do what we can to pay our debts. But Sérgio was like many people who refuse the pardon God so generously offers, who insist on trying to make restitution themselves. They try, through good works, sacrifice, and self-denial, to repay the unrepayable, when they could start writing a new story for their lives by accepting Jesus’ payment for their mistakes.

Receive God’s free pardon by simply asking and inviting His Son, Jesus, into your life: “Thank You, dear Jesus, for dying for me and forgiving me. I open my heart to You and accept Your gift.”

He paid a debt He did not owe;

I owed a debt I could not pay;

I needed someone to wash my sins away.

Christ Jesus paid a debt that I could never pay.

—Ellis J. Crum

Jesus offers a full pardon to every man, woman, and child. All we have to do is accept it.

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**My Friend’s Father**

When I walked in to see Joe, the father of my oldest friend Chris, who was suffering from a brain tumor and the doctors had given him only weeks left to live, I didn’t know if he would want to talk about his approaching death.

Joe had always been strong and capable. He had a voice so deep that no matter what he was speaking about, it resounded with confidence and authority, leaving little room for vulnerability. But as soon as Joe saw me he said, “Hey Vince. Good, I’m glad you’re here. I told Chris I wanted to talk to you.”

Joe went on to tell me that although he had always been confident that God exists in some way, he was finding himself increasingly scared about what comes next. As we spoke, what became clear to me was that Joe’s understanding of the central message of Christianity was that you should try to do more good than bad in your life, and then just hope that in the end your good deeds will outweigh your bad deeds. If they do, something wonderful awaits. But if they don’t, you’re in trouble. And as Joe reflected back over his life, he recognized that if that was the case, then he had reason to fear.

Never was I so incredibly thankful to be sitting before someone as a Christian. As an atheist, I would have had to say there is no hope beyond the grave. If I adhered to almost any other religion, I would have had to tell Joe that he was basically right, and did have reason to fear what was next. But as a Christian I was able to explain to Joe that while Christianity *does* say that God wants us to do good, that is *not* what makes us right with God.

I was able to share with him that the message of Christianity is that what makes us right with God is not about anything we do or ever could do, but rather about what Jesus has already done—once, and in full, and for all. I explained that in Jesus, we no longer need to fear judgment, because when he died Jesus took the judgment for everything we have ever done or will ever do wrong. And we no longer need to fear suffering, or shame, or even death, because Jesus has joined us in all of it, and invited us beyond it.

I explained this at length, and when I asked Joe if this made sense, he responded—in classic New Jersey fashion—”That’s a hell of a realization.” Emphatically he said it again, and then continued, “Sixty-nine years and I never thought of that. I thought Christianity was one thing, but it was something else entirely.” There was an extended pause, and then Joe said, “You know, Vince, you spend your whole life trying to make up for your [mess] ups, but this finally explains how we can deal with guilt.”

I asked Joe if he wanted to pray with me to accept this gift from God. He said he did, and with great conviction he thrust out his arm to me. We clasped hands, and we wept, and we prayed, and as we finished praying he exclaimed a loud “Amen.”

Joe asked me if my wife Jo knows this great truth about Christ as well. I said that she does, and he said, “It must be a happy life.” And then, after a thoughtful pause, “Now I’m actually looking forward to what’s next.”

When Joe’s family saw him the next day and asked how he was, for the first time in a long time he responded, “Wonderful.” The transformation in him was so visible that his family called me immediately and wanted to know every word that I had shared with him.

Life after death, on its own, does not bring hope. Forgiveness brings hope. *Christ* *brings hope*. And I believe, because I was there to see it, that Christ can be found with a simple heartfelt prayer.

“I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.” (John 11:25-26).

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**LOVED and VALUED**

By Marie Alvero

When asked which was the greatest of God’s commandments, Jesus replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind [and] love your neighbor as yourself. The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.” He obviously knew that in learning to love, we would learn what it means to be holy. I think He also knew that this was probably the hardest commandment to live up to. We could have coped better with a list of rules—at least then, we’d all know who was hacking it and who wasn’t. Who was worthy and who wasn’t. Now we’re stuck with the impossible task of loving those around us, even if they seem unworthy.

But for the longest time, that wasn’t my take on His commandments. I somehow equated love with worthiness. God loved me because I was worthy of His love, and I loved others who were worthy of my love. Then one day, my heart finally asked the question: What have I done that has made me worthy of God’s love? Nothing. Have I magically kept my sins and shortcomings within a “loveable” scoring? Nope. I came to the realization that He doesn’t love me because I’m worthy, but I’m worthy because He loves me. Honestly, it took a while for that to sink into my brain. It was extremely liberating to realize that I wasn’t on a quest to score as many “love” points as I could. It was also deeply humbling to realize I was fully and completely loved, without deserving it at all.

How countercultural is that! In a world that equates value with achievements, scorings, and numbers, the only reason I’m valuable to God is because He loves me. That’s when I finally understood what John meant when he said that we love God because He first loved us. When we understand the depth of God’s love for us, and the extent to which we are unworthy of it, how can we not love Him!

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**Commentary on Psalm 27**

By Jonny Walker

In a recent prayer and Bible study meeting we read Psalm 27 a couple of times from several different Bible translations and then were asked to take a short time praying and meditating on the meaning of this wonderful Psalm of David. When we reunited to resume our meeting, we each shared what we learned. I was amazed at how much truth and spiritual treasure was revealed in just 14 verses!

* Psa. 27:1 The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?
* Psa. 27:3 Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident.

In the first verse it encourages us two times not to fear! Verse three tells us the same. The leader of our prayer meeting commented that fear is something all people, including Christians, have to confront in the coronavirus crisis. A comment was made about the spelling of the word “fear”: False Evidence Appearing Real! That made an impression on me.

God’s Word emphasizes that there is no fear in His perfect love and that He has given us the power of love and of a sound mind! (Jn. 4:18) Someone else who had been meditating on the psalm said that despite the situation, the birds were still singing and living it up! They do not sow or reap or gather into barns, yet our heavenly Father feeds them. Are we not better than they? (Mat. 6:26)

* Psa. 27:4 One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple.
* Psa. 27:8 You have said, “Seek my face.” My heart says to you,“ Your face, Lord, do I seek.”

In verses 4 and 8, it talks about seeking the Lord. In any crisis, time of testing or tribulation, seeking the Lord should be what we do first and foremost. Isaiah 55:6 tells us to “seek the Lord and call upon Him while He is near.”

Not only do we need a time of quiet communion with the Lord in prayer in His tabernacle, but those who are searching are in need of shelter, too. (Other translations refer to it as a pavilion or hiding place or tabernacle, etc.)

* Psa. 27:5 For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will lift me high upon a rock.

When we seek the Lord, He lifts us up so that even though we are going through times of trouble and difficulty, we have the victory through our faith in Jesus, (1Jn. 5:4) and we can sing and offer Him sacrifices of joy—give Him praise!

* Psa. 27:6 And now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the Lord.
* Psa. 27:13 I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living!

During times of trouble and tribulation we can find comfort by counting our blessings and seeing the goodness of the Lord! God is good—always! We need to make a conscious effort to keep our eyes on God, who has promised “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” (Heb. 15:5) During this crisis, families that might be in quarantine could work on strengthening their family relationship and form greater bonds of love and kindness. Families need to spend time having fun, being happy, and laughing together! It is also helpful to consider limiting the time spent reading or watching negative news. We can instead focus on experiencing the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living!

* Psa. 27:14 Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!

Twice in the last verse of the psalm it tells us to wait on the Lord, which has a deeper meaning: not only to seek the Lord, but also to trust that no matter what trial or tribulation we face, God is in control of our lives and He has promised to work everything we face for our good. (Rom.8:28) Lastly, we should serve and wait on others through our witness; like waiters in a restaurant, we can serve others good, wholesome “soul food.”

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**Tribute to Mothers**

Where would we be without our mothers? It’s quite simple: we wouldn’t be here. So, honoring our mothers and showing appreciation for them should be on the top of our list.

Thank you, dear mothers, for being willing to bring us into the world, and then caring for us, nursing us, changing our diapers, giving potty training, teaching us to eat, walk, talk, and learn the basics until we could do those things by ourselves.

In the animal world, this whole process sometimes takes half an hour to a few days or weeks. With humans, it takes years. Even after we are slowly standing on our own, our mothers are still with us, rooting for us and supporting us in any way they can.

Thankfully, most of us had our mothers around for as long as we needed them. Orphan children grow up without mothers. So, thank you, dear foster mothers and caregivers in orphanages who step in to play the role of mother for these precious vulnerable children. Mother Teresa and countless others like her will receive many jewels in their crowns for all they did for neglected children.

Even if you might not have any children of your own, but are caring for someone else’s children or helpless and sick children, you are playing the role of their mother.

I am super thankful for my own mother, who gave birth to me and my eight brothers and sisters. She gave us a loving, Christian upbringing, and even when I lost my faith in God for many years as a teen, I know her prayers and training never left me. Her example had an impact on my life which kept me going through the dark days until I found the light again.

My parents were dedicated Catholics and had a beautiful Madonna built into the front wall of their house, which was a testimony for any passersby. In the summer, the statue was surrounded by sweet-smelling red roses. When visiting my parents, we would usually pray for each other that the Lord would keep and protect us all. One time we prayed this prayer right under that statue.

Since I am not Catholic, they knew I shared different beliefs in that respect, so they asked if it was okay that they pray to Mother Mary for me, which I accepted graciously. Later my father told me that he believed that there is a need in the Godhead for a Mother. I heartily agreed and explained that I see that role being represented by the Holy Spirit. While this is not even something expressed in standard Christian theology, Scripture does at times speak of God in terms of female attributes, which lends credence to the concept of the Holy Spirit exemplifying the feminine and maternal aspect of the Triune Godhead.

So, let us be thankful for our heavenly mother, our Comforter who has helped us in our spiritual life since we were born again in the Spirit (John 15:26). Like a mother, the Comforter leads, guides, teaches, nudges, protects, comforts, whispers, and sings to us from the heavenly realm.

A great big “Thank You!” to all you wonderful mothers for all you have done, are doing, and will continue to do for your own or someone else’s children. You deserve honor, not just on one day of the year, but every day. Lord helping us, we will pay you back a little bit by being a blessing to the people around us.

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**The Power of United Prayer**

“Sometimes our light goes out, but is blown again into instant flame by an encounter with another human being.”—Albert Schweitzer

Learning of the below testimony has given me a whole new perspective on the astounding power of united prayer and how much depends on it.

The story begins with a Norwegian missionary who had reached a point in her life where she wondered what good praying could do. Marie Monsen (1878–1962) was a Norwegian missionary active in China between 1901 and 1932. She longed for the day when spiritually dry China would flow like a river, but she didn’t see a way.

While observing the Yangtze River one day, she noticed that the source of the mighty river started with tiny drops of rain that joined at the top of the mountain. From this single observation, Marie sought a prayer partner who would join her in claiming the promise that “if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven” (NKJV). When she finally found someone she exclaimed, “The awakening has begun. Two of us have agreed!” The raindrops of revival prayer were coming together.

Soon about 40 Christians began meeting in a town in North China for prayer four times a day beginning at dawn. When the awakening came, more people were born again than in any previous year in North China. One missionary estimated that 3,000 people came to Christ in his town.

People, including pastors and missionaries, experienced a deeper Christian life than they had ever known before. A spirit of prayer was poured out on the church, and many times prayer meetings lasted two or three hours. Even children’s prayers led to the salvation of their parents and teachers. In 1932, after several years of people standing together in prayer, Marie Monsen’s saw her longing for spiritually dry northern China to flow like a river was fulfilled.

In Ecclesiastes we read that “Two are better than one … for they have a good return for their labor” (Ecclesiastes 4:9 NIV). You may be mighty in prayer alone, but you can be mightier with someone joining you.

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**Study on Psalm 23**

Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? -- Matthew 6:27

Of course, the answer to Jesus’ question is no. You can’t keep yourself from catching COVID-19 through worry. It won’t keep your family from getting sick. Worry just makes your problems worse because you can’t move a step closer to solving them. Worry can’t change your past. It can’t change your future. All it can do is mess up your present.

Worry is taking its toll on the world today. Late last month, a poll by the American Psychiatric Association noted that nearly half of Americans were anxious about getting COVID-19. Close to two-thirds were concerned about a family member catching it. Two-thirds of people also feared the long-lasting implications for the economy.

You weren’t made to endure worry. In fact, it wears you out more than just about anything else. So how can you overcome worry during this stressful season? Let Jesus be your Shepherd.

We can easily forget that we, have a shepherd. A shepherd takes the responsibility to feed, lead, and meet the needs of his sheep. Note that those aren’t your responsibilities. They are God’s responsibilities.

How does that work? Take a look at Psalm 23 and see what’s in it for you.

The Lord is my shepherd.—That’s relationship.

I shall not want.—That’s supply.

He makes me to lie down in green pastures.—That’s rest.

He leads me beside the still waters.—That’s refreshment.

He restores my soul.—That’s spiritual healing.

He leads me in the paths of righteousness… —That’s guidance.

… for His name’s sake.—That’s purpose.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death… —That’s tribulation.

… I will fear no evil… —That’s protection.

… for You are with me.—That’s faithfulness.

Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.—That’s discipline.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.—That’s hope.

You anoint my head with oil, my cup runs over.—That’s abundance.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.—That’s blessing.

And I will dwell in the house of the Lord...—That’s security.

… forever.—That’s eternity.

—David the psalmist, with comments by an unknown author

That’s why I start every day by saying, “The Lord is my shepherd. You’re a good God.” Then I repeat that throughout the day. If you start saying that phrase on a regular basis, your worry will decrease. Reminding yourself that you have a good shepherd who cares for you cuts down on worry.

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**Guard My Mouth**

By Elsa Sichrovsky

The Bible has a lot to say about the power of what we say. One of my favorite verses is “Set a guard over my mouth, Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.”1 Obviously, the Bible was written before the current era of social media and messenger apps, so it’s silent about the potential to either help or hurt when I use my fingers to tap out messages. I recently had an experience that taught me that the biblical warnings about the tongue should guide me to text with equal prayerfulness and prudence. Three coworkers and I were working on a project and, due to our hectic schedules, we frequently had discussions on Facebook Messenger.

On one occasion, John was unexpectedly absent for a crucial online discussion, and as a result, the rest of us were unable to come to any decisions without the information that he was responsible for presenting. In my exasperation over his unexplained absence and our wasted time, I fired off a text in the group chat: “I hate trying to have group discussions when one of our group members is missing!”

Up to this point, John had been a helpful and responsible team member, but shortly after this absence, he became uninterested. Later, I heard from a mutual friend that on the day of that important meeting John had had some urgent matters come up and he hadn’t intended to neglect his commitment to the project. He felt hurt by my outburst and had almost decided to leave the group.

I realized that if we’d been having a face-to-face discussion, I probably wouldn’t have burst out with that remark. But with a feeling of safety behind the barrier of my laptop screen, I’d felt free to let loose with whatever came to mind. Regardless of whether my frustration was warranted or not, I realized that I had my own lesson to learn. “Set a guard over my fingers, Lord; keep watch over my hands when I text!”

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**A Meditation on Psalm 91**

By Ronan Keane

Psalm 91:1: He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.

Where is the “secret place of the Most High”? It is found in intimate fellowship with God. The phrase “shadow of the Almighty” symbolizes God’s protection. When you’re in close personal fellowship with God, you’re under His shadow, under His protection. That promise comes with a condition: we have to do our part by staying close to Him. We do that by reading His Word in the Bible and doing our best to follow it, by keeping Him and His guiding spiritual principles present in our thoughts and decisions.

Psalm 91:2: I will say of the Lord, “He is my refuge and my fortress; My God, in Him I will trust.” In Bible times, stone fortresses provided the best protection in times of trouble or war, but God is an even surer defense.

Psalm 91:3: Surely He shall deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the perilous pestilence. This passage promises deliverance from those who intentionally seek to snare God’s people and from physical maladies such as plagues or epidemics.

Psalm 91:4a: He shall cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you shall take refuge. The picture is of God keeping His children safe, like a hen spreads her wings over her chicks to protect them.

Psalm 91:4b: His truth shall be your shield and buckler. A buckler was a small shield, about the size and shape of a dinner plate, which protected a soldier’s wrist. What is the truth of God? Jesus once said in a prayer to His Father, “Your word is truth.” (See John 17:17.) Another passage tells us to carry “the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one.” (See Ephesians 6:16.) Faith in God’s promises is our best protection.

Psalm 91:5–8: You shall not be afraid of the terror by night, nor of the arrow that flies by day, nor of the pestilence that walks in darkness, nor of the destruction that lays waste at noonday. A thousand may fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand; but it shall not come near you. Only with your eyes shall you look, and see the reward of the wicked. Even if danger is on every side, God will care for you and can bring you through it unscathed.

Psalm 91:9: Because you have made the Lord, who is my refuge, even the Most High, your dwelling place…

If the Lord is your refuge and dwelling place, in a sense you’re already dwelling in His presence, because you’ve made your home with Him.

Psalm 91:10: No evil shall befall you, nor shall any plague come near your dwelling. Of course, bad things *do* happen, even to people who pray for God’s protection. They get hurt, seriously ill, and have plenty of other problems. How could the statement “no evil shall befall you” be true? Well, consider what is “evil.” When God lets seemingly bad things happen to His children, they often teach us something or strengthen and build our character. When our wise and loving heavenly Father allows this, He does so for our own good, and it “yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” (See Hebrews 12:11.) He also promises that *all* things work together for good to those who love Him. (See Romans 8:28.)

Psalm 91:11–13: For He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone. You shall tread upon the lion and the cobra, the young lion and the serpent you shall trample underfoot. God’s angels watch over you continually, including your personal guardian angel, whose job is *you*. (See Matthew 18:10.)

Psalm 91:14: *God speaking*: “Because he has set his love upon Me, therefore I will deliver him; I will set him on high, because he has known My name.” There are conditions attached to God’s promises: He protects those who know and love Him. Your love, trust, and faith in God and His ability to deliver you give you the privilege of His protection.

Psalm 91:15–16: “He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him, and show him My salvation.”

There are six things God will do for us when we call on Him for help: 1) He will answer us, 2) He will be with us in trouble, 3) He will deliver us, 4) He will honor us, 5) He will give us a long, full life on this earth, and 6) He will show us His salvation.

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**Happy Father’s Day**

By Ruth Davidson

In the early part of the 20th century, Sonora Smart Dodd was attending a church service on Mother’s Day when she sympathetically got the inspiration to honor her father, a Civil War veteran. William Jackson Smart was a widower who fathered Sonora and her five brothers. (The Old Farmer’s Almanac—“The History of Father’s Day,” Aurelia C. Scott (June 11, 2019): The celebration of Father’s Day initially began in Spokane, Washington, on June 19, 1910. Although it is celebrated on a variety of dates worldwide, many countries observe this day on the third Sunday in June.)

I have a special admiration for single fathers who faithfully take on the role of both parents. While reflecting on the love, dedication and honor that Sonora had for her dear father who sacrificed so much for his children, I stopped for a moment to marvel at the many honorable fathers I have not only read about, but have also had the privilege of knowing personally.

One such wonderful father is my husband, Johnny, who fathered our own four children, and for a time while on the mission field of Spain, cared for three orphans, bringing them into our home and giving them Bible classes and including them in our daily witnessing ventures.

“Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is his reward. As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them” (Psalm 127:3–5).

I want to honor all the fathers who have nurtured their offspring and the children of others under their care “training them in the way they should go” (Proverbs 22:6). These fathers are true veterans—soldiers of the Lord, caring for God’s children, educating them, and fulfilling the verse in Proverbs 22:6, “The family that prays together stays together.” Even though they may at times not be able to be together physically with their loved ones, the bond of the spirit is not broken.

Hats off to all you wonderful fathers and father figures! You are God’s unsung heroes! Lord bless you and keep you inspired and strengthened, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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**9 Ways to Befriend God**

Jesus calls us His friends. One of the most famous verses about friendship with Jesus is from [John 15:13-15](https://biblia.com/bible/niv/John%2015.13-15), where Jesus says, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.”

As I meditated on this, I also reflected on what it means to be Jesus’ friend. He may call us His friends, but do we consider Him to be our Friend? I hope the following things I’ve learned from the Bible will challenge you, as it has inspired and challenged me, to grow in your friendship with the Lord. We are friends of God when we. . .

1. Make time to draw close to Him. Scripture records that “the Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend” ([Exodus 33:11](https://biblia.com/bible/niv/Exod%2033.11)). Nothing fosters my intimacy with God more than spending time with God alone—meeting Him face to face, as it were. Isn’t that how we would cultivate closeness with our friends, too? Likewise, we need to regularly meet with God and spend quality time to get to know Him more intimately.

2. Revere Him. While we can enjoy closeness with God, our intimacy with Him is also built on a deep reverence for Him. The Bible says, “The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his covenant” ([Psalm 25:14, ESV](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Ps%2025.14)). When we think in terms of human relationship, this may be difficult to understand. After all, what does it look like to revere a friend? One way that helped me think about this was to imagine what it’s like to make friends with a king. Friendship with God does not mean we lose a sense of reverence for Him; after all, God is the Lord of lords and King of kings. As we befriend our King with reverence, He will confide in us what’s upon His heart.

3. Listen to Him tell us what’s on His heart. And this is why Jesus tells us, “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you” ([John 15:15](https://biblia.com/bible/niv/John%2015.15)). Just as friends would listen attentively to what each other are saying, so we, too, can cultivate our friendship with Jesus when we pay close attention to what He reveals to us about the Father’s business.

4. Rejoice at His counsel and trust His corrections. When we read the counsel of God in the Bible, do we see it as tedious rules to follow, or do we delight in His wise instructions to us? “Perfume and incense bring joy to the heart, and the pleasantness of a friend springs from their heartfelt advice” ([Proverbs 27:9](https://biblia.com/bible/niv/Prov%2027.9)). When our close friends give us good, sincere counsel, we appreciate them deeply for it. A measure of how much we are a friend to God is how much we find joy in the pleasantness of His counsel to us in His Word. There are also times when our friends would correct us out of love. It may hurt us for a while, but we know that they care for us and want to see us grow. We wouldn’t like for them to only tell us what tickles our ears. For “better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses” ([Proverbs 27:5-6](https://biblia.com/bible/niv/Prov%2027.5-6)). Similarly, God rebukes us from time to time when we aren’t walking right, because He loves us and desires us to grow in maturity. Do we trust the rebukes of our Friend, who always knows better than us?

5. Obey what’s on His heart. It’s not just enough to listen to God tell us what’s on His heart—including His counsel and corrections for us—we also must do what He confides in us. Jesus says as much: “You are my friends if you do what I command” ([John 15:14](https://biblia.com/bible/niv/John%2015.14)). We build our friendship with God when we obey what God commands us to do.

6. Celebrate, and not compete with, Him. When John the Baptist was being compared to Jesus, he didn’t claim glory for himself, but exalted Jesus, saying, “The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less” ([John 3:29-30](https://biblia.com/bible/niv/John%203.29-30)). Friends naturally rejoice with each other and want the other person to succeed; their joy is our joy. We don’t see healthy friendship as competition. In the same way, when God’s glory is shown in a situation in which we are involved, do we celebrate our Friend’s moment, or do we want to compete with Him and divert the limelight to ourselves instead?

7. Have a pure heart and speak with grace. I find this proverb interesting: “One who loves a pure heart and who speaks with grace will have the king for a friend” ([Proverbs 22:11](https://biblia.com/bible/niv/Prov%2022.11)). Since God is the King of heaven and earth, might this verse also speak to what He looks for in a friend? Who wouldn’t enjoy hanging out with friends who carry purity in their heart and convey graciousness in everything they say? Perhaps, as we grow toward becoming a person like that, the King will enjoy our friendship with Him all the more.

8. Love Him unwaveringly, intimately, and sacrificially. Loving God as a friend involves loving Him loyally, in spite of difficulties; loving Him intimately; and loving Him self-sacrificially, just as He loves us. [Proverbs 17:17](https://biblia.com/bible/niv/Prov%2017.17) compares friendship with loyal brotherhood: “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity.” Good friends weather thick and thin together, instead of abandoning each other when the going gets rough. There will be times in our relationship with God when things become difficult. Would we love our Friend unwaveringly through these times as well? Scripture also paints friendship as a beautiful picture of intimacy, as in the friendship of David and Jonathan: “Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself. . . . And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself” ([1 Samuel 18:1](https://biblia.com/bible/niv/1%20Sam%2018.1), [3](https://biblia.com/bible/niv/1%20Samuel%2018.3)). In a greater way, because of Jesus, we are now “united with the Lord” and “one with him in spirit” ([1 Corinthians 6:17](https://biblia.com/bible/niv/1%20Cor%206.17)). Would we also love our Friend this much and this intimately?

9. Finally, the love of friendship is self-giving. After Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” ([John 15:13](https://biblia.com/bible/niv/John%2015.13)), He proved His love for us by laying down His life on the cross, so that we can be made alive with Christ ([Ephesians 2:5](https://biblia.com/bible/niv/Eph%202.5)). Would we, in our love for our Friend, love Him self-sacrificially, too? He gave His life for us. May we reciprocate by loving Him more than our own lives, so much so that we do not even shrink from death ([Revelation 12:11](https://biblia.com/bible/niv/Rev%2012.11)).

There’s still much I need to learn as I continue to meditate on what the Word says about friendship with God. While I grow in this, I’m incredibly amazed and grateful that the King of the universe loves me so much that He wants a friendship with me. It made me realize that even as I worship and revere Him, I can draw close to God as my best friend. I can always confide in Him, and He’s also eager to share His heart with me. In Jesus and through faith in Him, I can now approach my Friend in His throne room with freedom and confidence ([Ephesians 3:12](https://biblia.com/bible/niv/Eph%203.12); [Hebrews 4:16](https://biblia.com/bible/niv/Heb%204.16)).

Would you join me in building a friendship with God? We share in His fellowship when we give our lives for Him—to follow Him, serve Him, and “love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love.” ([Ephesians 6:24](https://biblia.com/bible/niv/Eph%206.24).) There is no greater love than this that we can give to our beloved, precious Friend.

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**In a class by HIMSELF!**

Napoleon Bonaparte said: Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I have founded empires. But on what did we rest the creations of our genius? Upon force. Jesus Christ founded His empire upon love; and at this hour millions of men would die for Him. —Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821)

Jesus Christ has done more to change history, the course of civilization, and the condition of man than any other leader, group, government, or empire before Him or since. He has given the love of God to billions and made the way for as many as will believe in Him to receive eternal life.

Jesus Christ is not merely a philosopher or teacher or rabbi or guru or prophet, though He has been called all these things. He is the Son of God. God the Father is a Spirit and is all-powerful, all-knowing, everywhere, and in everything. He is so far beyond our limited human comprehension that He had to send His Son, Jesus, in the form of a man, to show us what He Himself is like and to bring us to Himself.

Although many great teachers have spoken about love and God, Jesus *is* love and He *is* God. Jesus is the only One who died for the sins of the world and rose from the dead. He’s in a class all by Himself because He’s the only Savior. He said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” (See John 14:6.)

Why did Jesus die? Why would the Lord of the universe, God in the flesh, allow Himself to be captured, falsely accused, tried and condemned, whipped, stripped, and nailed to a cross like a common criminal? The answer is simple: because He loved you and me!

All of us have done wrong. The Bible says, “Everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard.” (Romans 3:23 NLT.) But Jesus took our punishment on Himself, so that we might find forgiveness and freedom from our sins.

Jesus loves you and stands at the door of your heart, asking to be let in. You can receive Him by praying this prayer:

* *Jesus, I want to know You personally, so I invite You to come into my heart. Thank You for dying for me, so I could be forgiven for my sins, find peace of heart and mind here and now, and receive God’s gift of eternal life. Amen.*

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**Feed on the Word of God**

Question: My family and most of the people I’m around every day aren’t interested in spiritual matters. How can I “keep the faith” in what seems to be an increasingly skeptical world?

Answer: Faith is at the core of our spiritual lives, so it’s worth fighting for. Here are a few tips that can help your faith not only survive, but thrive:

* Faith is built by faithful study of God’s Word. As you read and absorb it daily, as you think about its truths and how they apply to you, your faith will grow. “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.”(See Romans 10:17.) Jesus promises, “If you abide in My Word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” (See John 8:31–32.)
* Pray and meditate: God wants to have a personal relationship with you through His Son, Jesus. “There is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus.”(See 1Timothy 2:5.) Communing in spirit with Jesus—sharing your heart with Him and receiving His love, encouragement, and answers in return—will strengthen your connection and deepen your relationship and your faith in Him.
* Live your faith: “Faith without works is dead,” (See James 2:26) but conversely, putting faith into action brings it to life. As you apply God’s Word to daily living, its principles and promises will prove to be true time after time, and your faith in it and its Author will grow.
* Look for the good: Our faith can be sorely tested when we face adverse circumstances, but the Bible promises, “All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”(See Romans 8:28.) Look for and focus on that good, and your faith will be buoyant enough to face your challenges.
* Draw from the experience of others: Reading accounts of what God has done for others will increase your faith. What God has done for them, He can do for you!
* Thank God for His goodness: Praising God for His goodness propels us into His presence. “Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him, and bless His name.”( See Psalm 100:4.) The more you thank God for His goodness, the more you’ll find to be thankful for and the more He will bless you. It’s an upward spiral that helps you to draw near to God so that He can draw near to you. (See James 4:8.)

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**Restored Relationship**

By Uday Paul

In his classic autobiography *Confessions*, Saint Augustine, a theologian of the early church, narrates an incident which happened when he was a teenager. There was a pear tree near his family’s vineyard loaded with fruit that wasn’t even attractive in appearance or taste. Yet he and some friends stole pears from the tree. They did so not to eat them themselves, but to throw them to the pigs. He says that he and his friends committed the theft simply because they had pleasure in doing something that was forbidden, a tale as old as that of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Many generations earlier, when God brought the people of Israel out of bondage in Egypt and led them to the Promised Land, the people initially believed in and feared the Lord.(See Exodus 14:31.) But when they faced difficult circumstances in the course of their journey, they had a crisis of faith and turned away from God and Moses. While Moses was at the top of Mount Sinai receiving God’s Law, they made a golden idol of a calf to worship and sacrifice to. (See Exodus 32:1–6.) In the following centuries, the people of Israel and Judah continued to anger God with their idolatry and sinful actions, in spite of His goodness, miraculous protection and promises to them. (See Jeremiah 7:9.)

Since the time of creation when the Bible tells us that God sought out Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, God has desired intimate communion with mankind. (See Genesis 3:9.) But sin caused a breach in our relationship with the Creator, and we are unable to keep His commandments no matter how hard we try. As the Apostle Paul said, “When I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong.” (See Romans 7:21 NLT.)

The Bible says that the breach between God and mankind has been bridged through Jesus Christ. (See Romans 5:1.) Jesus’ life on earth, His death, and His resurrection paved the way for reconciliation and a new relationship with our heavenly Father. And having that relationship restored means new hearts that are responsive to God’s will for our lives.

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**Suffering for His Sake**

By Maria Hodler

“It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him.”—Philippians 1:29

I am a creature of comfort. I don’t want luxury, but I do love comfort. I like—no, strike that—LOVE creature comforts, such as warm cups of tea, soft blankets, cuddling with my kids, a plate of pasta, an evening laughing with friends, the joy of a shirt that fits just right, kisses from my husband, a pretty place to sit. These are the things I seek out. I also like knowing that everyone I love is comfortable. Truth be told, I consider these my needs.

Let me tell you about the things I don’t seek out: pain (of any kind), suffering, distress, and deprivation. I really dislike anything that will leave me cold, tired, or hungry—let alone injured or in pain. I like things to be easy. That’s just the honest truth.

There is this verse in the Bible that really conflicts with what I consider my “needs”: “It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him.” (Philippians 1:29) This passage was written to the Christians of Philippi when Paul was in prison. In the previous verses Paul was talking about how honored he felt to be in prison for preaching the gospel, and expressing how whether he lived or died, his life belonged to God.

So there I have it in black and white: “It is given to me to suffer for Christ.” Paul is letting us know that it’s not just a “feel good” religion where we find comfort, hope, encouragement, peace, and all that good stuff. Our faith in Jesus is also something we can expect to suffer for.

Religious persecution can seem so far removed from our universe that we don’t realize that even today there are many Christians whose faith costs them heavily in terms of personal comfort, safety, freedom, and even their lives. It can be a shock for those of us who live in places where religious persecution is less common that our faith comes with a “must be willing to suffer” clause. Jesus prepared our hearts for it when He said, “The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you.”(John 15:20)

Persecution is actually a promise for living the way God wants you to live. Paul says this in 2 Timothy 3:12: “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” So persecution can be a sign that your choices and lifestyle are probably right and godly.

I decided to put a face on what persecution can look like, just to prepare my heart and so that when it comes, I will remember that this is what I have signed up for.

1. Being called out for my beliefs. This could mean having to explain to some of my secular friends that I believe in things like intelligent design and being ridiculed for those beliefs. Or taking flak for not condoning certain kinds of behaviors or lifestyles. Or perhaps watching my kids being pushed out of the “cool crowd” for choosing to be true to their faith.
2. Having someone go out of their way to make my or my family’s life miserable because of our faith. Maybe someone will spread malicious stories about me and my loved ones. This could affect our social circle, club memberships, or employment, and cause hardship. This could go a step further, with someone putting our physical safety at risk.
3. Being persecuted by the law and the government. I live in a country that boasts of religious freedom, and I love that we have it. But I also know that this certainly is not the case in many countries today. Religious freedom is something that amazing people of the Christian faith have fought and given their lives for, and I do not take it for granted. It could be taken away. There are countries where being a Christian is a crime punishable by imprisonment, fines, and in the most extreme cases, death.

There’s a lot to be said about God’s grace, protection, miracles, and strength that comes when times are hard, which includes persecution. We can trust that He will give us His grace for any opposition or persecution we face in this life, from mild to severe. He will help us to face it with the same kind of love that makes us ready to fight and/or suffer for those we love. And we know that Jesus does the same thing for us.

“In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” (Romans 8:37)

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**Worth the Cost**

Christians have experienced persecution from Jesus’ time to the present. Our Lord explained in the Scriptures that this is a part of our lives as His followers. The apostle Paul also said, “Yea, and all that would live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.” (2 Timothy 3:12)

Many people equate the term “persecution” with its most severe forms—imprisonment, torture, and death. They hear accounts on YouTube, in the news, and on Christian websites of the rising numbers of those of faith who have been called to endure such forms of persecution. But then they look around at the many other Christians in the world who have never faced anything that severe, and they may wonder if somehow those people weren’t “godly” enough in some way.

I think the answer can be found by looking at the definition of the word “persecution.” In both secular and Bible dictionaries the definitions include terms such as “being pursued, pressed on, oppressed, or suffering punishment.” Some definitions described the meaning as “facing resistance, hostility, ill treatment, or opposition.”

When you live the truth of the gospel, it’s inevitable that you will face opposition and resistance in one form or another. Some are called to endure very extreme forms of persecution, while others suffer in other ways. Whatever the situation, God gives them the strength and courage to face what He has asked of them.

None of us can know what will come into our lives in the future, but we do know that whatever it is, Jesus will never fail us. Whatever He calls us to do in this life, if we are closely following Him, we will glorify Him. No matter what He asks us to do, His power will be there to help us when we need it. As we look to Him, we will be victors, and He will be pleased with us.

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**Friendship With Jesus**

Someone has defined friendship as “knowing the heart of another and sharing one’s heart with another.” We share our hearts with those we trust, and trust those who care about us. We confide in our friends because we have confidence that they will use the information to help us, not harm us. They in turn confide in us for the same reason.

We often refer to Jesus as our friend because we know that He wants what is best for us. We confide in Him because we trust Him. But have you ever considered that Jesus confides in His people? Jesus began calling His disciples friends rather than servants because He had entrusted them with everything He had heard from His Father. (John 15:15.) Jesus trusted the disciples to use the information for the good of His Father’s kingdom.

What does it mean to call Jesus your friend? Or more importantly, what does it mean when He calls us His friends? …

Being friends with Jesus means allowing yourself to be defined by Him. (Matthew 16:13–23.) Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do you say I am?” It is Peter who responds, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” In a few moments Jesus answers back, “You are Peter, the Rock.” Real friends help to define each other. In the give and take of genuine relationship, as “iron sharpens iron,” the imprint of the true friend becomes indelible on the soul of the other.

Being Jesus’ friend means hearing Him say, “Don’t be afraid.” (Matthew 17:7.) The Synoptics tell us that the three [Peter, James, and John] were terrified as they witnessed the Transfiguration. It was the only time any of His disciples would see His unveiled glory. Mark tells us Peter did not know what to say, he was so afraid. Matthew says that after it was all over, Jesus told the three, “Don’t be afraid.” Most often when He was revealed in a new dimension Jesus had to comfort them with those words. When their nets were miraculously filled for the first time in Luke 5, Jesus responds, “Don’t be afraid, from now on you’ll catch men.” When He approached the boat, walking on the water, He called out, “It is I, don’t be afraid.” (Mark 6:50.) It is what He tells the woman at the tomb as well. (Matthew 28:10.) In time, if we walk long enough with Jesus as our friend, He will reveal Himself in newer, deeper and sometimes even fearful ways. “Don’t be afraid,” He whispers. “I am.” If we don’t have to be afraid of God, we don’t have to be afraid of anything.

When Jesus is your friend, you are certain there is someone in your life who understands your fragileness, struggles and hurts. (Hebrews 2:18.) Jesus never called Peter or any of the others to do anything or to go anywhere He had not already been. Before He calls them to become “fishers of men,” Jesus demonstrates how it is done by first catching them. Before He sends them out to speak His word and do His work, Jesus spends a period of concentrated time preparing them. He would not call upon them to take up the cross until He had first demonstrated that He was determined to go on before them to Golgotha.

We cannot earn more of His love with good behavior. Even as we do not forfeit His love when we fail. He loves us as we are and not as we should be. We don’t change so that He will love us. He loves us so we can change. “It is His kindness that leads us to repentance.” (Romans 2:4.)

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**Being Friends of God**

I often post things on God wanting to have a relationship with us. I thought this post is interesting as another confirmation that God wants to have a personal relationship with us.

Friends play a major role in most people’s lives. It’s natural to want to have friends, and it’s also natural to feel sad if you don’t have friends. Many people in today’s world find a certain thrill to having a high number of people “friend” them on Facebook.

Having friends is something that’s been important since the beginning of time, and friends and friendship are talked about in the Bible starting with the book of Genesis. In Exodus 33:11 it says that God talked to Moses as someone talks to a friend. I wondered what kind of conversations those were. And then there was Abraham, who was called the friend of God in Isaiah 41:8 because he had such a close relationship with God.

It is interesting to note what James said about Abraham, the father of the faithful: James 2:23: And the scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness”; and he was called the friend of God. Notice how James draws attention to the fact that Abraham was called the friend of God. The term “friend” is somewhat intimate and conveys a sense of closeness, trust, and sharing.

What is remarkable is that Abraham was termed the friend of God. The great, almighty, ever-present and all-powerful, all-knowing God was the one who made this statement. This was not Abraham’s assessment of his relationship with God, nor how he thought about God. It was a statement that God made about Abraham.

James was quoting from Isaiah 41:8: “But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend.” The children of Israel were God’s servants and were the offspring of Abraham, who was God’s friend. Just consider for a moment how remarkable these words are and what a remarkable relationship they describe! Consider that a limited, physical, mortal being would be thought of by the all-powerful, immortal, all-knowing, supreme God as His dearly beloved friend. Also consider that an imperfect man, made from the dust of the ground, would be viewed by the perfect Creator God composed of eternal spirit as one with whom He could have a warm, lasting, and special friendship.

Yet the words my friend are exactly how God did consider Abraham, and his relationship with God was a true and deep friendship… We too can experience that same kind of friendship with God which Abraham enjoyed. God has made a way for all mankind to return to God and to become friends with God again. All you have to do is receive God’s gift. Ask Him to forgive you and receive Jesus into your life.

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**Study on Forgiveness**

The Gospels describe Jesus being whipped, beaten, and then nailed to a cross. As He hung there, waiting to die, some of His last words were “Father, forgive them.” (Luke 23:34 ESV.) Forgiveness was His response to an unjust trial, being lashed by a whip with weighted strands that lacerated the skin, inflicting unimaginable pain, having spikes hammered through His hands and feet, and being left to die on the cross in agony. While on the one hand, His reaction is very surprising, it also makes perfect sense when we read what Jesus taught about forgiveness throughout His ministry. He not only taught it—He embodied it, both in His life and His death. He practiced what He preached.

God’s forgiveness:

Jesus’ forgiveness reflected His Father’s forgiveness. In the Old Testament, when God revealed Himself to Moses, He said of Himself, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.” (Exodus 34:6–7 ESV.) God was saying that forgiveness is one of His divine attributes, that it is rooted in His character. This point is made throughout the Old Testament, for example: “You are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” (Nehemiah 9:17 ESV.) When we forgive others for things they have done to us, this reflects our understanding of divine forgiveness. We are to forgive others because we have been forgiven. Jesus died so that our sins could be forgiven, and we are called to forgive others when they sin against us or wrong us.

What forgiveness is, and isn’t:

Some hurt is done intentionally. We are assaulted in some way physically, verbally, or emotionally. Someone steals from us, perhaps by intentionally misleading us so that we are defrauded and lose our money, possessions, etc. We are betrayed by someone we love—a spouse, a family member, a close friend. Some hurts we experience are minor, but eventually become major, if they are repeated over and over again.

Forgiveness doesn’t deny the harm or wrong someone has done to us. It doesn’t make excuses for why they hurt us, and it doesn’t minimize the seriousness of the offense. It doesn’t mean that the offense stops hurting or is forgotten. Forgiveness isn’t an automatic restoration of trust. It doesn’t replace justice, as sometimes there are consequences to be faced even after the act of forgiveness. It’s not instant emotional healing. Forgiveness looks at the wrong done to us, admits that it has wounded us, and then decides to forgive—which is actually a decision to *start* the process of forgiving. It’s recognizing that the hurt we experienced was personal, unfair, and deep, and choosing to let go of the inner negative feelings we have toward someone who has hurt us, in order that the hurt no longer negatively affects us.

As Kelly Minter explains in her book, *The Fitting Room*: Forgiveness is not denying what our enemies have done; it’s not calling something whole that’s fractured or something pure that’s corroded. Forgiveness is looking in the face of what our offenders have done, recognizing their wound for all that it is, and then choosing to forgive. It has nothing to do with denying the wrong of those who hurt us, but has everything to do with changing our hearts towards them.

Sometimes we wait to forgive until the person who hurt us apologizes for what they’ve done. We want them to acknowledge that what they did was wrong and express regret. But there are a few problems with this. Sometimes the person doesn’t know they hurt you, and if that’s the case, they won’t ever apologize. In some cases, the person knows they hurt you, but they don’t care; and other times, the individual is no longer in your life. If you wait for someone to ask for your forgiveness before forgiving them, you may end up carrying your hurt for the rest of your life. There are cases where we’re hurt by those whose own problems spill over onto us in some way. For example, parents’ marital problems may hurt their children, but that isn’t intentional hurt. Sometimes we’re hurt by those who make mistakes. Sometimes someone is even trying to do something they think will be beneficial, but in the end, it doesn’t work out the way they expected. In such situations, it’s helpful to remind ourselves that we also do things that result in unintentional hurt to others. When we do, of course, we hope that those we have hurt will forgive us. And therefore we should be willing to forgive those who have harmed us without intending to.

There’s also the factor that not every hurt that we experience needs to be forgiven. Many of the injuries we feel in life are caused by the actions of others who mean us no harm. We live in a world where we regularly interact with people just like us, who often say or do things with no intent to hurt others, but sometimes these things do cause hurt unknowingly.

Letting go, healing, and reconciliation**:**

Understanding that Scripture tells us to forgive others, and agreeing that we should do so, is one thing. But the act of forgiving someone who has deeply wounded us can be a difficult and gut-wrenching task. C. S. Lewis wrote, “Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive.”

The Greek word most often translated as forgiveness is *aphiemi,* which is used to express letting something go, or canceling a debt. When we forgive someone for what they have done, we release them from a legitimate debt. We acknowledge that we’ve been injured or wronged, our trust has been betrayed, and our life has been marred by someone else’s hurtful actions. But we also understand that we too are sinners, that we offend and hurt others, and that we’ve been forgiven for our offenses by God. When we forgive, we make the decision to let go of our pain, our desire for retribution, our anger and negative feelings toward the person. We put the person, and their actions, into God’s hands.

It can be natural to feel that forgiving someone is equivalent to excusing them for what they have done. Not so. Rather it sets you free to let go of the pain of the offense, to move on without your feelings of ill will toward the person who harmed you constantly plaguing you.

In conclusion:

Forgiveness is a complex topic with many aspects. However, it’s clear that Jesus, by His example and His teaching, emphasized forgiveness. He instructed us to forgive, and He didn’t put caveats on that command. If we desire to be more like Jesus, then we must forgive others for their trespasses against us—as hard as it may sometimes be—because God has forgiven our trespasses against Him.

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**Tasks of Faith**

By Keith Phillips

“We do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”—2 Corinthians 4:16–178

Philip Yancey once wrote, “I used to believe that Christianity solved problems and made life easier. Increasingly, I believe that my faith complicates life, in ways it should be complicated. As a Christian, I cannot not care about the environment, about homelessness and poverty, about racism and religious persecution, about injustice and violence. God does not give me that option.”

Yancey goes on to quote that old familiar passage, which he explains this way: “Jesus offers comfort, but the comfort consists of taking on a new burden, His own burden. Jesus offers a peace that involves new turmoil, a rest that involves new tasks.”

What new tasks? Jesus summed them up when He summed up the Christian faith: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” ( Matthew 22:37–39)—our “neighbor” being anyone we are in a position to help. Loving others as much as we love ourselves doesn’t come naturally and seldom is easy, but it’s what we are called to as Christians.

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**Corona Virus Poem**

By Amanda, South Africa

I have a message posted on my door which is a constant reminder from Jesus of who He is and how His grace is sufficient in every situation. The message says: “In times of darkness, I will be your Light. In times of sadness, I will be your Joy. In times of struggle, I will be your Deliverance. In times of weakness, I will be your Strength. In times of doubt, I will be Faith unto you. In times of question, I will be your Answer. And most of all, I am Love to you, for I love you, forever.” I cannot tell you how many times these words have lifted me when I felt I could barely go on, and that fact is proof to me that God’s Spirit moves in the little reminders of His truths as well as the big ones.

There is so much bad news going around right now, so the Good News must be shared even more during lockdowns and the constant threat of COVID-19.

In light of having walked a very hard and humbling road—and still on it—with COVID-19, we have been left unemployed and without income for many weeks and we are still under lockdown. Regardless, I can honestly say that it is more “well with my soul” than ever before! God has been so faithful and undoubtedly carried us through this journey, using the hearts and hands of many who He touched to reach out to us.

The miracles we have witnessed are really supernatural, and we can only give the glory to Him. He has taken care of our every need and all four of our children beyond expectation. Fear has always been something that the enemy has used to cripple my walk of faith. I have had to really allow all God’s promises to sink deep into my heart and live only one day at a time, literally not worrying about tomorrow. For someone whose struggle is anxiety, this is not as simple as it sounds. I believe I have grown so much through our COVID-19 experiences, however, and walk in victory.

I have learned each day to remain thankful for every blessing and to focus on staying in a place of gratitude, rather than focusing on what has been taken from us. This has brought me to a new place of peace. What the enemy intended to destroy, God has used for His good.

This weekend I feel a deep sense of victory and wanted to share with you a poem that I wrote:

My Message to the Enemy

We met many years ago,

But I was too young to see you.

You introduced yourself as shame;

I remember when you clothed me in rejection

and taught me that I was always to blame!

There were many times that you called me yours

And I remember feeling good to belong.

You cheered me on many roads to destruction,

Even though I knew when it felt wrong.

Oh, enemy, you blindsided me too many times,

So often convincing me that you are right.

But what you didn’t know is that a long time ago,

you already lost the fight!

You preyed on my so-called weaknesses,

But your tactics started getting old,

And you panicked when I met Grace,

And you demanded justice for my soul.

You called me lonely and weak,

You’ve convinced me of many skewered identities,

And your greatest tactic yet—

Working hard at stealing all my hope, peace and serenity!

Today, enemy, I declare your efforts useless,

And all the destruction you caused as undone,

Today I bind you in Jesus’ Name,

As my victory has already been won!

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**Touch of the Master’s Hand**

The story of how this poem came to be is also relevant. The author, Myra Welch, loved to play the organ in her youth, but because of severe arthritis, became bound to a wheelchair and could no longer play. One day she heard a speech given to students on God’s power to use people in spite of their shortcomings and handicaps. She said, “I became so filled with light that I wrote it in just 30 minutes.” The fact that she could write it was an amazing feat in itself. She had to hold a pencil end in her twisted arthritic hands to laboriously bang out each of the letters on the typewriter keys. Nevertheless, she said, “the joy of writing outweighed the pain of my efforts.”

The Touch of the Master’s Hand

’Twas battered and scarred, and the auctioneer

Thought it scarcely worth his while

To waste much time on the old violin,

But held it up with a smile.

“What am I bidden, good folks,” he cried,

“Who’ll start the bidding for me?”

“A dollar, a dollar. Then two! Only two?

Two dollars, and who’ll make it three?”

“Three dollars, once; three dollars, twice;

Going for three…” But no,

From the room, far back, a grey-haired man

Came forward and picked up the bow;

Then wiping the dust from the old violin,

And tightening the loosened strings,

He played a melody pure and sweet,

As a caroling angel sings.

The music ceased, and the auctioneer,

With a voice that was quiet and low,

Said: “What am I bid for the old violin?”

And he held it up with the bow.

“A thousand dollars, and who’ll make it two?

Two thousand! And who’ll make it three?

Three thousand, once; three thousand, twice,

And going and gone,” said he.

The people cheered, but some of them cried,

“We do not quite understand.

What changed its worth?” Swift came the reply:

“The touch of the Master’s hand.”

And many a man with life out of tune,

And battered and scarred with sin,

Is auctioned cheap to the thoughtless crowd

Much like the old violin.

A “mess of pottage,” a glass of wine,

A game—and he travels on.

He is “going” once, and “going” twice,

He’s “going” and almost “gone.”

But the Master comes, and the foolish crowd

Never can quite understand

The worth of a soul and the change that is wrought

By the touch of the Master’s hand.

Even an old and seemingly worthless violin can transform lives. Something as small as a few fish and loaves can be transformed into a feast for thousands by the touch of the Master’s hand, as when Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes.2 Moses found out that despite his inadequacies, something as common as a stick can be transformed by the Lord into a rod of God to do mighty signs and wonders.

**Another Story about the Touch of the Master’s hand Poem**

It is said that there are three artists that give us music: God, who gives us magical wood to make the instruments; the instrument maker, who after months of labor awakens the music dwelling in the wood; then the musical maestro, who liberates the music from its woody confines to set the listener free.

I witnessed firsthand an illustration of music’s redemptive power when I visited a woman’s prison in Uganda. Many of the women there were imprisoned because they had defended themselves from violent abuse from their husbands, but it had ended tragically. In some cases, these women were pregnant or lived within the prison walls with their children in tow, as there was no one else to take care of them.

I and a group of friends who were Christian volunteers had come to give the women some meaningful entertainment in the form of some rousing inspirational guitar music, a clown comedy and magic show, and a skit that I was to perform. In searching for a theme that would be relevant, I realized after finding out more about them that many of the prisoners felt that they were worthless and their usefulness in life was over. They were now just surviving day to day in hopeless mode.

I came across the well-known story poem of “The Touch of the Master’s Hand” written back in 1921 that seemed perfect for the occasion. The story is of an old beat-up violin that is put up for auction. At first it only gets a low price of just a few dollars, but after an old man comes up and plays it, the violin fetches a high price of several thousand dollars. Why did the same violin change in value so drastically? It was the “touch of the master’s hand” that played such beautiful music.

These women, like the old “worthless” violin in the story, had great worth and were still able to “make beautiful music” in their lives if they let the Master touch them. We performed the skit in their local language using a real violin. I mimed playing it to a recording from a violin maestro. After some simple directions, the audience played the part of the people bidding for the violin. Afterwards, many commented on how the story had given them new hope.

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**More Thoughts on the Touch of the Master’s Hand**

God often surprises us in how He works. There are many famous musicians who have overcome their seeming handicaps, such as the blind pianists Ray Charles or Stevie Wonder; or consider Itzhak Perlman, the great violin virtuoso who has won numerous awards for his performances, including four Emmys, who said, “I actually wanted to play the violin before I had polio, and then afterwards, there was no reason not to.” He contracted polio at four years of age, which took the use of his legs but spared his hands. He turned this liability around to become his greatest asset.

One of the most extreme examples is that of Leslie Lemke, who was blind, autistic, and had brain damage and cerebral palsy. He couldn’t stand until he was 12 and was 15 before he learned to walk, but through much love from his parents and many miracles he became a great pianist.

I thought it would be good to hear a firsthand experience on this theme and I remembered my friend Steven Gilb, who is a blind musician and accomplished writer. He told me, “The value of what we have depends on how we use it, no matter how little or much it seems to be at first glance. I can say that I never felt like that seemingly worthless violin, because I have discovered the joy of using whatever talents I have.

“I am living proof of the fact that God is able to take seemingly worthless things, such as our most annoying tendencies, and turn them into our best abilities.

“I had a love for music since I was a kid; and at two years old, I would beat with my hands on anything I could find. While others thought this was annoying, my parents sensed my interest in music and eventually got me a pair of bongos. Today I play drums, among other instruments, and God uses these gifts for His glory.”

These stories should encourage us that if other people could overcome such overwhelming challenges, we can too. Our part is to welcome the Master’s touch in our daily lives so we too can play beautiful music.

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**I Propose a Love Campaign**

“Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around.”—Leo Buscaglia

“If you have kindness in your heart, you offer acts of kindness to touch the hearts of others wherever you go—whether they are random or planned. Kindness becomes a way of life.”—Roy T. Bennett

**Think about it:**

“In the world of pain there is a need for love, a real, real need for love… Love your brother… a need of love, a need of heart.” These words translated from the famous song by the Colombian singer Juanes paint a picture of humanity’s universal need for love. “Everybody needs love” rang out another song from the sixties. And with the countless social conflicts, outbreaks of violence, cries of outrage, the scourge of the pandemic, along with the “viruses” of selfishness, self-centeredness, and self-service and other diseases of our times, what we need most is love.

Love that becomes real by actions, love that gives a hand, that is friendly and kind, that walks in another’s shoes and finds a way to help whenever possible. “A real, real need for love” to be shown by acts of kindness toward those who cross our path in the course of a day, or in the virtual communications that have become our new normal in confinement.

I sincerely believe that if we all make even a little effort to be courteous, to give words of encouragement, to show social graces, to make contributions, the world’s “climate” would improve, and we would all breathe a little easier. If we would try not to be critical of people, but to see their worth regardless of social condition, appearance, or any other prejudice we may be tempted with, there would be fewer violent reactions and more dialogue, more forgiveness.

My friend Margaret was telling me about the serious, cranky man who works where she has a rented parking spot. One morning she was trying to operate her remote control to gain access to the parking lot, but she just couldn’t get it to open the gate. When Margaret asked the parking attendant for help, she received the curt reply: “Lady, you aren’t using the control right.”

In the end, Margaret learned how to use the remote control, but she kept thinking about the attitude of the parking attendant. Why did he act the way he did? Did he feel humiliated in front of the people who rented in the building? Had he received unkind treatment? What could it be? Then she remembered the saying “A little bit of love goes a long way.” She decided to take positive action, to learn the attendant’s name and always greet him kindly.

“Good morning, Mr. Liborio. How are you?” If she saw something positive that she could comment on, she would mention it. “Oh, you got a new haircut; it looks really good on you.” If he is eating a snack, she says, “Bon appetit!”

Through little gestures, she let him know that she was considerate of him as a person. Months passed, and Mr. Liborio began to change. Now he is softer and kinder and even likes to crack jokes with her. “When a person can joke with you, it is a sign of confidence,” Margaret says.

Now they enjoy the relationship that has been born between them. He greets her warmly. It is the fruit of courtesy and respect—to make someone feel that they are recognized and valued. It is bringing God’s presence into the little daily details.

I propose a Love Campaign to the tune of the song by Juanes and the many other musical artists who motivate us with the message in their music and lyrics. Let’s be kinder, gentler, and more humble with those around us. To think we are better than others is just plain arrogance, as the apostle Paul put it—we should esteem others more than ourselves. (Philippians 2:2–4.)

Along with Margaret, I genuinely believe that each bit of kindness, courtesy, and respect we share with others will go a long, long way toward recouping the love that has been lost among us. Everywhere, wherever we go. That we may bring to life these lyrics of Juanes, “It’s time to change in the thoughts of all, hate for love. It’s time to change.”

By showing people love, we show them Jesus, who can then work in their lives and motivate them to join us in our love campaign. Together we can help to change this cold, insensitive world into a warmer, more loving place, a little more like heaven. Really, by acting more kindly toward others we can all be Jesus’ representatives who shine with His Spirit of love and prove to others, especially the more skeptical people, that He does exist and He cares for them and wants to lead them in the way of love.

* “It’s not our job to play judge and jury, to determine who is worthy of our kindness and who is not. We just need to be kind, unconditionally and without ulterior motive, even—or rather, especially—when we’d prefer not to be.”—Josh Radnor
* “It’s a little embarrassing that after 45 years of research and study, the best advice I can give people is to be a little kinder to each other.”—Aldous Huxley

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**Connecting With God**

By Julie Vasquez

God’s idea of prayer is not a ritual, but loving and lively communication between a father and his beloved children. But sad to say, most people don’t think they can talk to God like that. Some think they’re not religious enough, not righteous enough, or not spiritual enough.

Some think He’s too big, too far above them. Some think He’s too busy to be concerned about them and their problems, which they think must seem awfully petty to Him. Some feel unworthy, not good enough. Some feel guilty or ashamed about things they’ve done. Some are even afraid of Him. If only they understood how differently God sees it!

God wants to have a personal relationship with each of us, and He wants it to be the deepest, most meaningful, most fulfilling and rewarding, most natural part of our lives. Now that’s not to say He wants to take away from the other relationships and activities that we enjoy and consider important. To the contrary, He wants to be a part of all that. He wants to make our day-to-day living easier, He wants to give the things we experience greater meaning, and He wants to enjoy them with us. In a word, He wants to make our lives better. He wants to add a wonderful new dimension to all that we do—the dimension of His loving presence.

How do we establish such a relationship, especially when we feel small and unspiritual and unworthy? How do we make that connection?—Through His Son, Jesus.

None of us can really grasp how great and wonderful God our Father is, because He and His Spirit are greater than the whole universe. He’s so beyond our comprehension that He had to send us Someone who could show us His love, Someone we could experience, Someone who could bring God down to the level of our limited human understanding.

So He sent His Son, Jesus. Jesus lived for thirty-three years on Earth in human form and experienced the joy and sorrows that we as humans experience. (1 John 1:1–3,14.) Jesus has been here, so He can understand us and be the link between us and God. (1 Timothy 2:5.)

We can get personal with Jesus. He even told us to ask Him into our hearts: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.” (Revelation 3:20.) He’s the One we can have direct, personal contact with. He is the One we can approach God through.

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**The Problem in the Post Office**

I was received into the membership of the Christian Church by the Rev. Arthur Harries, and it was he, my first pastor, who told this story to his congregation.

The post office officials were much interested as they read the words written on an envelope which had just arrived from Japan. "To the man of God, ------, Monmouthshire, England." "Who can that be?" asked the sorting official; but his colleagues were unable to answer his question. Then one man exclaimed, "Well, it's not the parson, anyhow," and instantly they all agreed. The local clergyman did not fit the description. One by one, the names of the other ministers were mentioned; but in spite of the fact that several of these men were nice fellows and exceedingly popular, they did not fit the description on the envelope. The problem of delivering the letter was becoming acute, when rather abruptly a member of the staff said, "I know. Yes, I know who he is. He's odd Mr. -----. If any man in this town has earned the right to that title, he is the man." The listeners agreed, and he was deputed to take the letter to the man's house.

The old Christian marveled that the post office staff should think him worthy of such a compliment; but when he opened the letter, he discovered that their choice had been sound. The letter had been written to him by a Japanese student whom he had entertained months earlier. The young man had been studying in Wales, and had been received into the home of his new friend. When he returned to Japan, he desired to send a letter of appreciation; but alas, he had lost the address of his former host. However, that presented no problem, for he had gained the impression that he had stayed with a man of God. He smiled and was reassured, for in his own country, a man of God was known near and far. Surely this would be the case in other lands. Everybody would know the man of God, and if he addressed the letter in that fashion, it would reach its destination. It did; and in so doing, paid tribute to one whose consecrated service had charmed a community. One wonders what would happen if such a letter were addressed to the man of God--in my town. Would the postal officials think of me?

Paul wrote in Philippians 1:20, 21, "...that with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Paul's reference to the magnifying glass is most interesting, and its connection with "the man of God" is obvious. A magnifying glass does not actually increase the size of anything: It only seems to do this. Actually the object at which a man may be looking is exactly the same size, but the glass brings it into bold relief, and the watcher is able to see it more clearly. It is not possible to make Christ more wonderful, for "He is the altogether lovely One, and the chiefest among ten thousand." Yet, if by God's grace we can become magnifying glasses--in perfect alignment with the Master and men--they will be able to see Him more clearly when they look at Him through us. All the details of His superb glory may be brought into delightful relief if we are what we ought to be. Probably Paul had a similar thought in mind when he wrote, "Ye are living epistles, seen and read of all men." We read the Scriptures to learn more of Christ. Likewise, people read us in order to achieve identical results.

The fact that the letter addressed to the man of God reached its destination, suggests that the honoured Christian had been a magnifying glass. He had so magnified his Lord that even the people in the post office had been able to see Him. They had also read his everyday actions, and had recognized in them the presence of the Lord. The old man had been a living epistle of righteousness. And ever since my old pastor told that story, I have wistfully longed to reach that standard of holiness. It is the Christian's Mount Everest!

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**Doing What God Tells you**

By Dan Roselle

There will be times in our lives when we’re pretty sure that we need to do something, or we feel God is asking us to do something, but we just don’t want to do it. Maybe we’re lazy. Maybe we’ve never done it before. Maybe it seems like too much work. Maybe we’re afraid of failure. Whatever the excuse—I mean, the reason we have—it’s not always a good basis for not doing something.

Have you ever been in a situation where you were having a hard time accomplishing some undesirable task that you were assigned, and you were hoping against hope that somehow you wouldn’t have to do it? Maybe you were hoping someone else would do the job for you. Or maybe you hoped your boss or teacher would recognize the difficulty you were having and would say, “That’s okay, you don’t have to finish it.”

There were quite a few men in the Bible who were presented a task by God and had to decide whether or not they would see it through. One of those men was Jonah. When God presented him with the task of warning Nineveh, his response was to run the other way. Sometimes in the past, when reading the story of Jonah, I would arrogantly wonder how Jonah could so easily say no to God. But after experiencing my own dilemmas in life, I began to wonder what made Jonah want to run the other direction in the first place.

The Bible doesn’t give any details about Jonah’s feelings on the matter. Could it be that Jonah didn’t feel skilled at preaching or talking in front of many people? Or maybe he had been to Nineveh before and didn’t like the place? Suddenly I could understand where Jonah might have been coming from. We know that eventually Jonah did obey and warn the Ninevites as he was supposed to, and whatever reasons held him back from doing it in the first place, he overcame them and did a good job in the end (even though he experienced some difficulties too).

How about Noah? The Scriptures don’t go into detail about Noah’s abilities. We know that after the flood he was a farmer and planted a vineyard; however, before the flood I wonder if Noah was much of a carpenter. Maybe he’d never even seen a ship before he started building the Ark. The Ark was estimated to be 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high, which is about the size of a small cargo ship. As you can imagine, it was no small feat for Noah to tackle the Ark-building assignment. And of course, we know from the Bible that “Noah did everything just as God commanded,” whether he felt he had the skills or not. And as Noah obeyed God and did what He showed him, Noah found that he could do an excellent job at shipbuilding.

It became clear to me in thinking about these two men’s lives that even if I don’t feel qualified for or interested in doing some type of work that God would like me to do or He has given me to do, if I really put my heart into it and commit to doing it, I can accomplish what I didn’t think possible.

I like how Saint Francis of Assisi made this point. He said, “Start by doing what is necessary, then do what is possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible.”

Is there anything you’ve been putting off that you know in your heart you should be doing? If you’ll just start tackling it and put your whole heart and efforts into it, I’m pretty sure that you’ll discover that you’re more capable than you think! And the satisfaction of completing something you don’t feel good at or would rather not do is quite rewarding.

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**Thirsting for God**

By Dennis Edwards

I was reading Psalm 102:6 and came across the phrase: “I am like a pelican of the wilderness.” It led me to wonder what exactly the psalmist meant. It brought to my mind a wildlife documentary of Africa that I once watched. The documentary showed how after the heavy spring downfall, a lake would be created in what had been a semi-arid wilderness. The parent pelicans would come, nest, and rear their young along the newly created lake. But over the course of the summer, the lake would slowly start to dry up. The adult pelicans would eventually fly away with the young pelicans that were old enough to fly. However, those pelicans which were last to be born and still not so sure about flight would stay by the diminishing lake. Eventually they would die as the lake turned to desert or wilderness once again.

The author in the psalm may be seen as painting a picture of his desperation for God; like a dying pelican in desperate need of water and rescue, so do we look to God for help in the time of great affliction and distress.

In Psalm 42, the author keeps repeating how his soul is cast down. He says, “Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why are thou disquieted in me?” (Psa. 42:5) Though the author of the psalm is feeling that dryness of spirit, he does not stay there. He calls out to God for His mercy and help. He reminds God of His promises to His children. He says, “All thy waves and billows are gone over me.” (Psa. 42:7) Here he sounds like he feels like a drowning man going down for the last time. But he continues with, “Yet the Lord will command his loving kindness in the daytime, and in the night his song shall be with me, and my prayer unto the God of my life.” (Psa. 42:8) He reminds God of His loving kindness and he keeps God’s Word as his song and prayer in the night season. Finally, he reminds himself to not lose his hope in God and finishes his song with “Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God.” (Psa. 42:11)

Please do not lose hope in God if you are feeling down and out and with no sunrise on the horizon. God loves you and will work things out as He always has before. Do not lose hope! Call upon Him with all your heart. He is not far from any of us, as the apostle Paul so wisely put it: “God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’” (Act 17:27-28)

Lift up your hands in praise unto Him, the God of all flesh. He loves you and is going to take care of you somehow. Trust Him. Meditate on His promises, and His Word will be “a lamp unto your feet, and a light unto your path.” (Psa. 119:5) For “the path of the just is like a shining light that shines more and more until that perfect day.” (Pro. 4:18)

And remember what C. S. Lewis wrote, “If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world.”

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**Apologize**

By Sally García

Years ago, I was in a complicated and unpleasant work situation with one of my coworkers. Things didn’t improve, and I was relieved when he eventually moved on. Sometime later, I received a short email from him with two simple words: “I apologize.” *That’s good!* I thought. *He wants to apologize.* So I looked for the attachment that would have the “formal apology.” But there wasn’t any. I’d expected a written, detailed acknowledgment of the headaches, tensions, and complications that he had caused. What I got was those two words—“I apologize.” I knew that God was asking me to forgive him and turn the page. He had done his bit by asking for forgiveness, and the right thing to do was to extend that to him—but deep down, I felt a bit cheated. *Couldn’t he have put a bit more effort into his apology?*

But it wasn’t long before I needed to apologize to someone and didn’t know how to go about it. Getting into the reasons behind my actions would give the impression that I was creating a platform to justify myself and would make my apology sound insincere, plus I risked starting the controversy all over again. In the end, I copied the apology I’d received from my former coworker—and it was no less sincere for being simple.

It isn’t easy to ask for forgiveness. It’s awkward, and most of us don’t have enough practice. Gary Chapman and Jennifer Thomas share some very helpful advice in their book, *When Sorry Isn’t Enough*.1 They say that when we seek reconciliation, the key … is learning the apology language of the other person and being willing to speak it. … When you fail to speak their language, it makes forgiveness more difficult because they are not sure if you are genuinely apologizing.

The authors break this language down to five main categories:

* Expressing regret. For some people it will be enough to sincerely say, “I’m sorry.”
* Accepting responsibility. Avoid making excuses and admit, “I was wrong.”
* Making restitution. Do more than say sorry—for example, ask, “What can I do to make it up to you?”
* Repentance. Promise, “I will try to never do it again.”
* Requesting forgiveness. Show vulnerability by humbly asking, “Please forgive me.”

I think that humility and sincerity are key, to be genuinely concerned about the offended person’s needs and learn to listen to their hurts. And if both sides are willing, anything wonderful can happen in the restored relationship.

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**A Study on Peace, Intro (an eight part series on peace)**

**Promise of the day:**

* Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them. -- Psalm 119:165

**Think about it:**

Biblical principles are timeless, because no matter what our circumstances or our age or the times we live in, they hold true as much today as ever. The Bible says that God wants to give us His perfect peace in place of our anxiety, stress, and fear. This applies to non Christians as well as Christians. God loves us all and wants to give us all His gift of peace.

Recently, the Lord drew my attention to an article which is almost like a mini-course on how to access and grow that peace that God offers us. The author of the article, J. R. Miller, looks at each step in the process of applying and developing this wonderful gift in our lives.

Yes, God will help you when you cry out to Him in times of crisis, but He also wants to help you to live in a way that allows His peace to permeate your life on a daily basis. In order to do this, it’s necessary to exercise that gift of peace. This takes time and effort.

Our lives are filled with crises and hardships, successes and failures. However, through them all, what matters is that we learn to trust God and His son Jesus and find that perfect peace no matter what we face.

I have found that the more I fill my heart and mind with God’s words, the easier it gets to trust Him, and the more peace I have. So I encourage you to read the next nine posts—A Study on Peace Parts 1-9. The short anecdotes, and examples, scattered throughout offer illustrations of the steps we can take to continue our growth in His peace, built not on hoping, but on knowing that He is there, ready to help us and keep us if we ask.

**Praise of the day:**

* Psalm 69:30 I will praise the name of God with a song, and will magnify him with thanksgiving.

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**A Study on Peace Part 1 – The Promise of Peace**

Adapted from “In Perfect Peace,” by J. R. Miller, 19021

“Perfect peace!” That is what we all want. That, too, is what Christ offers us in His gospel. Among His farewell words we find this bequest: “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you” (John 14:27). After His return from the grave, on three occasions He gave the same blessing to His disciples, “Peace be unto you” (John 20:19, 21, 26).

Peace is for everyone, Christians and non Christian alike. Jesus wants to give you this peace, all you have to do is believe on Him (Jesus) and confess Him with your mouth and become one of God’s children.

Peace is part of the blessing God wants to give us all. Christ desires us to have peace. If we do not have it, we have missed part of the blessing of being a child of God, part of our inheritance as children of God. It is not a peculiar privilege which is only for a favored few; it is for everyone who believes in Christ and will accept it, yet so many of us do not possess this gift of peace.

How many of us really have Christ’s peace today? How many of us are kept in perfect peace through all the circumstances and experiences of our changing lives? What is wrong? Is the gospel really not what it claims to be? Are the blessings it promises only lovely dreams which never are fulfilled, which cannot be fulfilled? Is grace not able to help us to attain that peace? The Bible is full of great words like rest, joy, peace, love, hope. Are these words only illusions? Or can these beautiful things be attained?

We can say with perfect confidence that these words paint no impossible attainments. For example, peace—it is not a mocking vision which ever flees away from one who tries to clasp it and take it into one’s heart. It is not like the sunbeam which the child tries to gather up off the floor in its chubby hand, but which only pours through its fingers and slips from its clasp. Nor is it merely a heavenly attainment which we must wait till we die to get. It is a state into which every believer in Christ may enter here on the earth, and in which he may dwell in all life’s changes.

The first step is to receive the Prince of Peace into your heart and if you have already done that claim the promise He gave to you, “My peace I leave with you, My peace I give unto you.”

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**A Study on Peace Part 2 – Examples of God’s Peace**

Adapted from “In Perfect Peace,” by J. R. Miller, 19021

It is well worth our while to think what is meant by peace, as the word is used in the Scriptures, and then ask how we may obtain this blessing. The word runs through all the Bible. We find it far back in the Old Testament, in the benediction used by the priests—“The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace” (Numbers 6:26). Here peace is offered as the gift of God, a blessing dropped from heaven into trusting hearts.

In Job, in the words of Eliphaz the Temanite, we have the exhortation, “Acquaint now thyself with him, and be at peace” (Job 22:21). According to this word, the way to find peace is by getting acquainted with God. It is because we do not know Him that we are not at rest.

In the Psalms are many words about peace. For example, this: “The mountains shall bring peace to the people” (Psalm 72:3). The mountains take the storms which beat in fury about their tall peaks. Down at the mountain’s base, however, the sweet valleys lie in quietness, meanwhile, sheltered and in peace. So it is that Christ met the storms, which exhausted their fury upon Him, while those who trust in Him nestle in security in the shelter of His love.

We have a beautiful illustration of this in two of the Psalms which stand side by side. Psalm 22nd is called the Psalm of the Cross. It tells the story of the crucifixion. Its first words, certainly, were used by the Redeemer when He was passing through His dying agony. The Psalm is full of the experiences of Calvary. The storms are sweeping fiercely about the mountain’s brow.

Then how quietly and beautifully the 23rd Psalm nestles in the shadow of the 22nd Psalm, like a quiet vale at the mountain’s foot! It shows us a picture of perfect peace. We see the shepherd leading His flock beside the still waters and making them lie down in the green pastures. Even in the deep valley there is no gloom, for the shepherd walks with His sheep and quiets all their fears. This Sweet Shepherd Psalm could come nowhere but after the Psalm of the Cross.

The prophets also tell us much about peace. In Isaiah, especially, the word occurs again and again. The Messiah is foretold as the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). Farther on, we come again under the shadow of the cross, and read that “the chastisement of our peace was upon him” (Isaiah 53:5). The security and eternity of our peace are pledged in a wonderful promise which says, “The mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee” (Isaiah 54:10).

But it is in the New Testament that the wonderful fulness of the meaning of peace is disclosed. On every page the word shines. The angels sang at the Redeemer’s birth, “On earth peace” (Luke 2:14). At the close of His ministry, Jesus said to His friends, “In Me ye might have peace” (John 16:33). Over eighty times the word appears in the New Testament, half of these being written by Paul, the homeless, persecuted apostle.

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**A Study on Peace Part 3 -- Pictures of Peace**

Adapted from “In Perfect Peace,” by J. R. Miller, 19021

An artist sought to portray peace. He put on his canvas a sea, swept by storms, filled with wrecks, a scene of terror and danger. In the midst of the sea he painted a great rock, and high up in the rock a cleft, with herbage and flowers, in the midst of which he showed a dove sitting quietly on her nest. These same elements—the rock, the cleft, the soul’s hiding place—we have in the hymn Rock of Ages.

For Jesus said, “These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Our peace is not found in a place where there is no trouble—it is something which enters the heart and makes it independent of all outside conditions.

In the ruins of many old English castles a well is found down deep among the foundations. Thus, water was provided for use in the castle in time of siege. The enemy might cut off the streams which ordinarily supplied the people in the castle with water. They might shut the gates, so that no one could go out to bring in water from any stream or spring outside. But the defenders within the walls cared not for any siege while the well in the foundation gave its copious supply of pure, fresh water. So it is with us in whose heart the peace of God dwells. He is not dependent upon outside conditions and circumstances, for he carries in himself the secret of His joy, hope, peace, and strength.

It is very evident that we cannot hope to live in this world without troubles. No such life is possible. Nor can we hope for a life without sorrow. To love is to weep some time in the journey. God does not shelter us from grief. But the peace promised is an experience which neither trial nor sorrow can disturb—it is something that changes sorrow into joy.

A tourist writes of finding a fresh-water spring beside the sea, as sweet as any that ever gushed from amid the rocks on the mountainside. He took his cup and drank of the water that bubbled up in the sand. Soon the tide rolled in again; pouring its brackish flood over the little spring, and burying it out of sight for hours. But when again the bitter surf flowed out, the spring was found sweet as ever. So it is with the peace of God in the believer’s heart. It dwells deep. In the day of joy it sings and is glad. Then sorrow comes and the salt floods pour over the life, covering it. But when the sorrow is past, the heart’s peace remains sweet and joyous as ever.

In these times of trouble I encourage you to reach out to God and partake of His gift of peace. You can claim Jesus’ promise to you, that in spite of any troubles you have in the world He has overcome the world. So you can be assured if you have Him living in your heart He will overcome the troubles of the world for you.

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**A Study on Peace Part 4 – Songs of Peace**

Adapted from “In Perfect Peace,” by J. R. Miller, 19021

A party of tourists were traveling along a country road. As their carriage approached a cottage near the drive, they heard singing. The voice that sang was sweet and rich, and of wondrous power. The members of the party were entranced. They stopped to listen as the notes of the song rose higher and clearer. Presently a young girl came out of the cottage with a basket on her arm.

“Please tell us who is singing so sweetly in your cottage,” one in the party asked of her.

“It is my Uncle Tim, sir,” answered the girl. “He has just had a bad turn with his leg, and he is singing away the pain.”

“Is he young? Can he ever get over the trouble?” asked the young man.

“Oh, he is getting a bit old, now, sir,” replied the girl. “The doctors say he’ll never be any better in this world—but he’s so good it would make you cry to see him suffering his terrible pain, and then hear him singing the more sweetly the more he is suffering.”

That is what the peace of God will help us to do. It gives us “songs in the night.” It puts joy into our hearts when we are in the midst of sorest trouble. It turns our thorns into roses.

The life of faith is not freed from pain, but out of the pain comes rich blessing. The crown of thorns must be worn by the Master’s friends who follow Him faithfully, but the thorns burst into sweet flowers as the light of heaven’s morning touches them.

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**A Study on Peace Part 5 -- The secret of peace, secret 1**

Adapted from “In Perfect Peace,” by J. R. Miller, 19021

There is music in these words of the old Hebrew prophet. Why can we not get the music into our lives? Why do we not all have this perfect peace in our hearts? Why do we lose the quiet and the calm of our spirits so easily in the world’s distractions and troubles? Let us see if we cannot learn the secret of peace which lies in the prophet’s words. The secret is in three parts.

One is that the keeping is of God, not us. We cannot keep ourselves in peace. There is a majestic power in self-control, and we should seek to have that power. Not to be master of our own life is to be pitiably weak. We should learn to control our feelings, our emotions, our appetites, our passions, our desires, our temper, our speech. He that rules his own spirit is the greatest of conquerors, greater than he that captures a city (Proverbs 16:32). No doubt perfect self-mastery has much to do with keeping the heart quiet in danger, calm and undisturbed in sudden trial. But this is not the real secret of peace. Our self-control reaches but a little way. One may have it and remain unmoved in the face of the most disturbing experiences, and yet not have the peace of God.

This is the secret of peace which the old prophet’s words reveal. God keeps us. “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace.” The Bible teaches this truth of the divine keeping as the source of all true security and confidence. There is no other keeping that really avails. It is only when God is our refuge and strength that we can say, “Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea” (Psalm 46:2).

There is a story of a saintly old man who desired that the only epitaph on his grave should be the word “Kept.” This word contained the whole history of his life. In one of the psalms the lesson is written out for us in full. “The Lord is thy keeper.” “He that keeps thee will not slumber. … The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul” (Psalm 121:3, 5, 7). It is God who keeps us—it is God alone who can keep us—in perfect peace.

Only God is eternal, the same yesterday and today and forever, and only when we rest in God and trust in Him can we have a peace which cannot be disturbed. “Trust ye in the Lord for ever: for in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength” (Isaiah 26:4). When we are held in the clasp of His love, we are safe from any disturbance, for He is omnipotent. Our refuge is secure forever, for He is from everlasting to everlasting.

We have the same teaching concerning the divine keeping in a passage in one of the epistles of Paul, in which he also gives us the secret of peace. “The peace of God … shall guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7 ASV). The figure is military. Men sleep in quiet confidence in their tents, in the darkest nights, in time of war, in the presence of the enemy, because sentinels wake and watch through all the darkness. God’s own peace keeps guard over our hearts and thoughts, so that nothing shall ever disturb us or alarm us. Nothing ever can disturb God. He looks without fear upon the wildest storms. He is never dismayed by things which seem to us calamitous. His infinite and eternal peace will guard us and keep us in the shelter of its own blessed quiet and calm.

This is part of the great secret of peace which we are trying to learn: “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace.” It is God’s omnipotence that keeps us. It is God’s Spirit who broods over the turbulent floods of life and brings order out of chaos. It is God’s Son who stands on the vessel, amid the wild storms, and compels them to become quiet and still at his feet. It is God’s grace that enters into the believer’s heart and abides there as a well of living water within, springing up into everlasting life. We cannot command our own spirit and compel it to be at rest, when sorrow or peril is on every side. God alone can keep us in peace. Nothing that is not infinite and eternal can be a safe and secure hiding-place for an immortal life.

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**A Study on Peace Part 6 -- The Secret of Peace secret 2**

Adapted from “In Perfect Peace,” by J. R. Miller, 19021

But there is another part of the secret of peace which is also important for us to learn. “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee” (Isaiah 26:3). There is something for us to do. There is no doubt that God has power to keep us in perfect peace. He is omnipotent, and His strength is a defence and a shelter to all who hide in Him. But even God will never compel us into submission—we must yield ourselves to Him. Even omnipotence will not gather us into its invincible shelter by force—we must be willing in the day of God’s power (Psalm 110:3). All we need to do is to stay our minds upon God. That means to trust Him, to rest in Him, to nestle in His love. We remember where John was found the night of the Lord’s last supper with His disciples—John was leaning on Jesus’ breast. He crept into that holy shelter and reposed upon the infinite love which beat in that bosom. John simply trusted, and was kept in holy peace.

A beautiful story is told of Rudyard Kipling during a serious illness. The nurse was sitting at his bedside on one of the anxious nights when the sick man’s condition was most critical. She was watching him intently and noticed that his lips began to move. She bent over him, thinking he wished to say something to her. She heard him whisper very softly the words of the old familiar prayer of childhood, “Now I lay me down to sleep.” The nurse, realizing that her patient was not needing her services, and that he was praying, said in apology for having intruded upon him, “I beg your pardon, Mr. Kipling; I thought you wanted something.” “I do,” faintly replied the sick man; “I want my heavenly Father. He only can care for me now.”

In his great weakness there was nothing that human help could do, and he turned to God, seeking the blessing and the care which none but God can give. That is what we need to do in every time of danger, of trial, of sorrow—when the gentlest human love can do nothing—creep into our heavenly Father’s bosom, saying, “Now I lay me down to sleep.” That is the way to peace. Earth has no shelter in which it can be found, but in God the feeblest may find it.

“Let not your heart be troubled,” said the Master; “believe in God, believe also in Me” (John 14:1). This is the one great lesson of faith—“Believe.” “Into thine hands I commit my spirit” (Psalm 31:5, Luke 23:46).

“Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee.” Stayed on Thee! These words tell the whole story. They picture a child nestling in the mother’s arms, letting its whole little weight down upon her. It has no fear, and nothing disturbs it, for the mother’s love is all around it. “Stayed” means reposing. It suggests also the thought of continuousness of trust and abiding. Too much of our trust is broken, intermittent—this hour singing, the next hour in tears, dismayed. If we would have unbroken peace, we must have unbroken trust, our minds stayed upon God all the while.

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**A Study on Peace Part 7 -- Secret of Peace Secret 3**

Adapted from “In Perfect Peace,” by J. R. Miller, 19021

“Whose mind is stayed on thee.” That is the final secret of peace. The reason so many of us do not find the blessing and are disturbed so often by such trifles of care or sorrow or loss is because our minds are not stayed on God. We are distressed by every little disappointment, by every failure in plan or expectation of ours, by every hardness in our circumstances or our condition, by every most trivial loss of money, as if money were life’s sole dependence, as if man lived by bread only. A trifling illness frightens us. The most trivial things in our common life disturb us and send us off into pitiable fits of anxiety, spoiling our days for us, blotting the blue of the sky and putting out the stars. The trouble is, we are not trusting God, our minds are not stayed on Him. That is what we need to learn—to rest in the Lord, to be silent in Him, to commit our way to Him.

Paul puts it very clearly in a remarkable passage in which he tells us how to find peace. “In nothing be anxious” (Philippians 4:6 ASV). That is the first part of the lesson. “Nothing” means really nothing. There are to be no exceptions. No matter what comes, in nothing be anxious. Do not try to make out that your case is peculiar and that you may rightly be anxious, even if others have no reason for worry. “In nothing be anxious.”

What then shall we do with the things that would naturally make us anxious? For there are such things in every life. Here is the answer: “In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God” (Philippians 4:6 ASV). Instead of carrying your trials and troubles yourself, and worrying about them, take the frets and vexations to God, not forgetting to mingle praise and thanksgiving with your requests. Get them completely out of your hands into God’s hands, and leave them there.

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**A Study on Peace Part 8 -- The God of Peace**

Adapted from “In Perfect Peace,” by J. R. Miller, 19021

God is strong, omnipotent. We need not fear that His power to keep us will ever fail. There never is a moment when He is not able to sustain us. When the question is asked, “From whence shall my help come?” the answer is, “My help cometh from Jehovah, who made heaven and earth” (Psalm 121:1, 2 ASV). He who made all the world and can surely bear up one little human life and protect it from harm.

God is wise. We are not wise enough to direct the affairs of our own lives, even if we had the power to shape things to our minds. Our outlook is limited—cut off by life’s close horizons. We do not know what the final outcome of this or that choice would be. Oftentimes the things we think we need, and think would bring us happiness and good, would only work us harm in the end. Things we dread and shrink from, supposing they would bring us hurt and evil, are oftentimes the bearers to us of rich blessings. We are not wise enough to choose our own circumstances, or to guide our own affairs. Only God can do this for us.

He not only has strength, He has also knowledge of us and of our need and of our danger. He knows all about us—our condition, our sufferings, our trials, our griefs, the little things that vex us, as well as the great things that would crush us. All that human love can do, all that money can do, all that skill can do, avails nothing. Human arms may clasp us very firmly, yet their clasp cannot keep us from the power of disease or from the cold hand of death. But the love and strength of God are everlasting. Nothing can ever separate us from Him (Romans 8:38–39).

An Old Testament promise reads: “The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.” If we are stayed upon the eternal God, nothing ever can disturb us, for nothing can disturb Him on whom we are resting. If we are held in the clasp of the everlasting arms, we need not fear that we shall ever be separated from the enfolding. These arms are always underneath us. No matter how low we sink, in weakness, in faintness, in pain, in sorrow, we never can sink below these everlasting arms. We never can drop out of their clasp.

The everlasting arms will be underneath the feeblest, most imperiled child of God. Sorrow is very deep, but still and forever, in the greatest grief, these arms of love are underneath the sufferer. Then when death comes, and every earthly support is gone from beneath us, when every human arm unclasps and every face of love fades from before our eyes, and we sink away into what seems darkness and the shadow of death, we shall only sink into the everlasting arms underneath us.

The word “are,” too, must not be overlooked—“Underneath are the everlasting arms.” This is one of the wonderful present tenses of the Bible. To every trusting believer, to each one, in all the ages, to you who today are reading these words and trying to learn this lesson, as well as to those to whom the words were first spoken, God says, “Underneath you are now, this moment, every moment, the everlasting arms.”

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**A Study on Peace Part 9 -- The path of peace**

Adapted from “In Perfect Peace,” by J. R. Miller, 19021

The staying of the mind upon God suggests that we are to let ourselves down upon His strength, into the arms of His love, and to rest there without fear, without question. But this does not mean that we shall drop our tasks and duties out of our hands.

Always, in every exhortation to trust God, obedience is implied and presupposed. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness,” said the Master. When we do this, He continued, we need never be anxious, for then all our needs shall be supplied.

If our peace is disturbed by some sudden trial or sorrow, or by overwhelming trouble, God very gently helps back into the nest those who have been thrown out of it by any such experience.

One day President Lincoln was walking beside a hedgerow, and came upon a young bird fluttering in the grass. It had fallen out of its nest in the bushes and could not get back again. The great, gentle-hearted man stopped in his walk, picked up the little thing, sought along the hedge until he found the nest, and put the bird back again into its place. That is what Christ is seeking to do every day with lives that have been jostled out of the nest of peace. With hands infinitely gentle He would ever help us back to the peace we have lost.

Love is the law of spiritual life. We do not begin to live in any worthy sense until we have learned to love and to serve others. Selfishness is always a hinderer of peace. Peace is the music which the life makes when it is in perfect tune, and this can be only when all its chords are attuned to the keynote of love.

Peace gives such blessedness to the heart, and is such an adornment to the life, that no one ever should be willing to miss it. Whatever other graces God has bestowed upon us, we should not be content without peace, the most beautiful of them all. However beautiful a character may be, if it has not peace it lacks the highest charm of spiritual adornment. And Jesus is willing to bestow upon the lowliest of us the divinest of all graces—peace, His own blessed peace.

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**Loving God Completely**

By Ken Boa

In the last several years, I have adapted and used this prayer by Richard of Chichester in my own quiet times before the Lord: “Thanks be to Thee, O Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits which Thou hast given us; for all the pains and insults which Thou hast borne for us. O most merciful redeemer, may we know Thee more clearly, love Thee more dearly, and follow Thee more nearly; for Thine own sake.”

If we are to love God completely, it will involve our whole personality—our intellect, our emotion and our will. “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30). The better we come to know God (“may we know Thee more clearly”), the more we will love Him (“love Thee more dearly”). And the more we love Him, the greater our willingness to trust and obey Him in the things He calls us to do (“follow Thee more nearly”).

1. “May We Know Thee More Clearly.”

The great prayers in Ephesians 1 and 3, Philippians 1, and Colossians 1 reveal that Paul’s deepest desire for his readers was that they grow in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. The knowledge the apostle had in mind was not merely propositional, but personal. He prayed that the Lord would give them a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him, that the eyes of their hearts would be enlightened and that they would know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge (Ephesians 1:17-18; 3:19). What does it take to know Him more clearly? The two essential ingredients are time and obedience. It takes time to cultivate a relationship, and unless we make the choice of setting aside consistent time for prayer and the reading of Scripture, we will never become intimate with our Lord. Obedience is the proper response to this communication, since it is our personal expression of trust in the promises of the Person we are coming to know.

2. “Love Thee More Dearly.”

To know God is to love Him, because the more we grasp—not merely in our minds but in our experience—who He is and what He has done for us, the more our hearts will respond in love and gratitude. God’s love for us is spontaneous, free, uncaused and undeserved. He did not set His love on us because we were lovable, beautiful or clever, because in our sin we were unlovable, ugly and foolish. He loved us because He chose to love us.

3. “Follow Thee More Nearly.”

As we grow to know and love God, we learn that we can trust His character, promises and precepts. Whenever He asks us to avoid something, it is not because He is a cosmic killjoy, but because He knows that it is not in our best interests. And whenever He asks us to do something, it is always because it will lead to a greater good. Our great task in the spiritual life is to do His will, to love the things He loves and to choose the things He sets before us for our good.

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**New Year**

By Sally García

December is by far my busiest month of the year. The days are filled with organizing events, recycling toys to give to needy kids, buying gifts, decorating the house, and planning Christmas get-togethers and Christmas Eve dinner. Then there’s New Year’s celebration to ring out the old and ring in the new.

But there are a few special days, like an island of refuge floating quietly in this sea of perpetual movement—the days *between* Christmas in the Gregorian calendar and New Year’s—December 26th through 30th. These days are my personal time of reflection. Not that I have five days of retreat, because there’s still a lot to do to finish the year! But during these days is when I take stock of the year that is ending and contemplate the new one before me.

First, I pull out my agenda to go over the most significant events of the year. I thank God for the obvious blessings, as well as the “blessings in disguise” that came in the form of difficulties and lessons learned the hard way! I’m always amazed at how much can happen in 12 months, and how long ago some of the events seem! If I didn’t take time to look back in reflection, some important threads of the tapestry of my life would be lost in forgetfulness, and I might miss the bigger picture of how events are unfolding. Over the years I’ve a made a collection of year-end reviews.

Then I look forward to the year ahead. Some years seem to be already pretty much planned out, others are more nebulous, but in any case, I know there will always be surprises. I dedicate the year to God and write a prayer as I feel led. I also try to find an appropriate Bible verse that will go along with the prayer.

This year, my verse is Matthew 6:33 from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”1 I hope to review it often and to study what it means to “seek God’s kingdom first” in my actions. I’d also like to contemplate what “righteousness” means to Him, which I suspect is more about love, faith, and grace than my puny efforts toward perfection. And lastly, to have faith for “all these things” that my heavenly Father promises to provide.

Every year I look forward to these days between Christmas and the New Year, when I can lay aside time to step back from December’s activities, take stock of the past year, count my many blessings, and commit the coming year to His precious care.

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