

May/June 2014

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

THE NAMES OF GOD

ALSO: TOWARD A NEW CREATION

Friends:

In 1811, the emperor Napoleon commanded that all his subjects in the lowlands of Europe be registered with their nearest town government. This meant that millions of people who did not have a family name had to choose one that would be permanent. Suddenly many millers, bakers, and coopers (and their children) became Miller, Baker, and Cooper. Sons (and daughters) of John, Will, and Andrew became Johnson, Wilson, and Anderson. These names endure, but do they tell us anything about the people that bear them today? Does your name describe you?



In May, Back to God Ministries International Director Kurt Selles leads us in a study of the biblical names of God. At first, we might think that what we call God is not much different from what we call our neighbors, but these are meaty descriptions of who God is and what he is like. God reveals his character to us in these meaningful names, so be prepared to dig in to God's personality!

Then, in June, with Art Schoonveld we review God's unfolding story in history. Beginning at creation, we explore what God does and how we respond. Then we lean forward through the story of God and his people toward history's climax: a new creation in God's presence!

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

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Steven Koster". The signature is written in dark ink on a white background.

—Steven Koster

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"The Names of God"
Kurt Selles



"Toward a New Creation"
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reFRAME MEDIA

this month

The Names of God

Kurt Selles

In the Bible, God reveals his character and personality in remarkable ways through many different names. We learn these names in the assurance and deliverance God provides to Abraham, Hagar, Moses, Gideon, and others among his covenant people Israel. We learn even more through Jesus, God's Son, who helps us grow to understand God more as the heavenly Father who cares for each one of us. Again and again in the life of his people God stoops down to meet them and to reveal more about himself and his love, especially in their times of deepest need. My prayer is that through focusing on God's names this month you will be comforted and assured, growing to know him better than ever before.

Rev. Kurt Selles is the director of Back to God Ministries International, the ministry that brings you these Today devotions. He is a graduate of Calvin College and Seminary and received his Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. Before joining Back to God Ministries, Kurt served as the director of the Global Center at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama, where he also taught missions. For 19 years prior to that, he served as a missionary in Taiwan and China. Kurt and his wife, Vicki, have three children.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

"This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name . . .'"
—Matthew 6:9

In Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet asks, "What's in a name? . . . That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

She's certainly right. The person we love is far more valuable than his or her name. Still, names are important. Names today don't reveal much about us, but names in Bible times often did. For example, Adam's name comes from the Hebrew noun *adamah*, meaning "ground" or "earth." People are truly earthlings. Throughout the Bible, names tend to reveal something about the person they name.

If the names of the people in the Bible reveal something important, how much more do the names of God, the main actor in all of Scripture! God has graciously stooped to reveal himself to us. He reveals

his personality and character through his actions and his names. This month, as we look at God's names in the Old and New Testaments, we learn who he is by reflecting on the meaning of his names.

Learning God's names challenges us to take him seriously in all areas of our lives so that, as Jesus taught us, we can pray, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it in heaven."

Father in heaven, thank you for graciously revealing yourself in the Bible and in our lives. Help us to say with our mouths and our lives, "Hallowed be your name." For Jesus' sake, Amen.

EL OR ELOHIM: “THE ONE TRUE GOD”

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

—Genesis 1:1

The most common name for God in the Hebrew Bible is *El*, meaning “God.” Derived from a Semitic language, the root meaning of *El* is “might, strength, power.” This name for God occurs widely throughout the Bible.

Sometimes the word *el* refers to the pagan gods of nations surrounding Israel. When it refers to the one true God, however, the word is always capitalized, meaning “God of gods.” More often (about 2,600 times in the Old Testament), the name *El* occurs in plural form as *Elohim*. This form, sometimes called the “plural of majesty,” emphasizes that the God of Israel is “the one true God of the universe.”

The names *El* and *Elohim* set the God of Israel in stark contrast with the false gods of other nations, proclaiming them counterfeit and stating that he is the

one true God. No wonder the very first verse of the Bible reads, “In the beginning God [*Elohim*] created the heavens and the earth.” No one knows the reason for the plural form here, but the early church fathers suggest it points to the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—one God in three persons.

El or Elohim, “the one true God,” declares that our world belongs to him. We do well to honor him in all that we do and say. How will you do that today?

God, thank you for your marvelous creation! Thank you for your amazing grace! Help us to honor you as the one true God in all that we do and say. Amen.

EL ELYON: “THE MOST HIGH GOD”

“Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth.”
—Genesis 14:18

El, the Hebrew name for God, occurs in the Old Testament in many compound forms to reveal important qualities of God’s character. One of these combines *El* with *Elyon*, a Hebrew word meaning “go up” or “ascend.” So the name *El Elyon* reveals God as “The Most High God.”

The name *El Elyon* isn’t used often, but it occurs three times in our reading for today. In Genesis 14 we read about battles taking place between several kings in the Valley of Siddim, near the Dead Sea. In these skirmishes, Lot, Abram’s nephew, is taken captive. After Abram rescues Lot, he meets up with the defeated kings in another valley near Jerusalem.

Then Melchizedek, the king of Salem (Jerusalem), brings Abram an offering of bread and wine. We know almost nothing

about Melchizedek, except that “he was priest of God Most High [*El Elyon*].” With this offering Melchizedek bestows on Abram a blessing from “God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth.”

How does Abram respond? He acknowledges the blessing of the Creator God by giving Melchizedek a tenth of all his possessions. But Abram’s offering isn’t to Melchizedek; it is to *El Elyon*, “the Most High God.”

How will you honor and sacrifice to the Most High God in your life today?

O God Most High, please forgive us for often shunting you aside. Help us, like Abram, to worship you as Creator and Protector. Move us to give our lives as an offering to you. Amen.

EL ROI: “THE GOD WHO SEES”

[Hagar] gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: “You are the God who sees me,” for she said, “I have now seen the One who sees me.”

—Genesis 16:13

Today’s story centers on the painful triangle of relationships between Abram, Sarai, and Sarai’s slave Hagar. The story contains weakness, jealousy, competition, contempt, scorn, rejection, meanness, and other emotional violence. When the situation becomes unbearable, Hagar runs away. But now she is in a desperate situation: pregnant and alone in the desert.

But there’s grace and mercy in this raw story too. The name for God in this text draws from the Hebrew word *roi*, which has to do with “looking,” “appearance,” “seeing,” and “sight.” Alone and utterly forsaken in the desert—in her darkest moment—Hagar realizes that *El Roi*, “the God who sees,” has *never* lost sight of her.

Don’t we all find ourselves at times in desperate situations? Even if our circumstances are

not desperate, they can certainly be difficult at times, and we can feel as if we have no hope. But even in times of hopelessness, we can be assured: *El Roi*, “the God who sees,” is watching over us, seeing us, and providing for us in our darkest hour of need.

In our bleakest moments we too feel all alone. But *El Roi*, “the God who sees,” has never lost sight of us and promises to care for us. What greater assurance can we find?

Dear God, you see and care for us in all of our squabbles, struggles, and needs. Help us to know this through Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

EL SHADDAI: “GOD ALMIGHTY”

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless.”
—Genesis 17:1

The origins of the Hebrew word *shaddai* are unknown, but most scholars believe this word means “almighty” or “most powerful.” Together with *El* it gives us the compound name *El Shaddai*, “God Almighty.”

The name *El Shaddai* first occurs in Genesis 17, where God promises to provide Abram a son and to make him into a great nation (see also Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-6). Here God also changes Abram’s name to *Abraham*, saying, “I have made you a father of many nations”—as surely as if it were already accomplished.

Imagine how Abram felt when he heard this promise! Later in the story, Abram even “laughed to himself” about it (17:17).

The message of this story is simple: Nothing is impossible for *El Shaddai*, “God Almighty.” As we

continue to read the story of the Bible, we see that from Abram comes Isaac, then Jacob, then the people of Israel, then Jesus the Savior, and from Abraham’s spiritual descendants through Jesus comes the church (Romans 4-5), which today spans the globe and includes every tribe and tongue. Truly, nothing is impossible for *El Shaddai*!

Knowing God Almighty, what big changes can we expect in our lives? Nothing is impossible with God!

God Almighty, thank you for revealing yourself to us with your power and might. Help us to expect big things when we live for you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

EL EMET: “THE FAITHFUL GOD OF TRUTH”

Into your hands I commit my spirit; deliver me, LORD, my faithful God.
—Psalm 31:5

Everyone needs to depend on and trust other people. Many people in our lives are trustworthy, but we’ve all been let down at one time or another. Maybe you trusted someone or some product with your health, only to be disappointed. Or maybe you trusted a financial advisor or broker with your money, and you lost everything. Sometimes even close friends or family members let us down in harsh and inconsiderate ways. People and things eventually let us down.

The name of God in today’s reading—*El Emet*—contrasts sharply with the unreliability of people and things. *Emet*, the Hebrew word for “trueness” and “faithfulness” calls to mind God’s trustworthiness and dependability. The psalmist conveys God’s steadfastness using rock-hard imagery: “You are my rock and my fortress.”

Amid all of life’s uncertainties and disappointments, and especially when people let you down, are you still able to confess that God is your rock and fortress? If you can do that, you can also take the next step with the psalmist and say, “Into your hands I commit my spirit; deliver me, LORD, my faithful God.”

We cannot always be faithful and true to God, but *El Emet*, “the Faithful God of Truth,” will always be faithful and true to us.

O Faithful God of Truth, help us to proclaim you as our rock and our fortress. Help us to take refuge in you and lean on your everlasting arms. We ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

EL TSADDIK: “THE RIGHTEOUS GOD”

*“Who foretold this long ago, who declared it from the distant past?
Was it not I, the LORD?”*

—Isaiah 45:21

Has someone ever made a claim that you just knew they couldn't or wouldn't keep? You wanted to believe, but deep down you knew that what they promised wouldn't happen.

God's claims, however, are completely reliable. We see this in Isaiah 45, where God promises to “raise up” Cyrus, the Persian king, to return the exiled people of Israel to Jerusalem. In today's verses we find the compound name *El Tsaddik*, “the Righteous God,” which highlights God's justice, lawfulness, and righteousness. *El Tsaddik* promises to return his people to their homeland to show that he keeps his word *and* to show the nations of the world that he is God—“and there is no other.”

Keeping his promise, God uses Cyrus to return the Jews to their land, and they begin to rebuild Jerusalem, the city of God.

Another, even bolder promise shows up in the Old Testament as well—and it includes us. The Lord promises to send his anointed one, the Messiah, the “righteous Branch” of Israel, and he is called “The LORD Our Righteous Savior” (Jeremiah 23:5-6). In Jesus Christ, who delivers us from sin and takes the punishment we deserve, we see God's words and deeds completely line up.

Others may let you down, but *El Tsaddik*, “the Righteous God,” provides justice and always keeps his promises.

O God, the Righteous One, your words and deeds are trustworthy and true. Help us by the power of your Spirit to live by every word that comes from your mouth. Amen.

EL GIBBOR: “THE MIGHTY GOD”

He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
—Isaiah 9:6

In this brief but awe-inspiring verse we find four names for God that apply to the promised Savior, the Messiah, whom we know today is Jesus Christ. Let's look today at the second name in this list, *El Gibbor*, which means “Mighty God.”

The Hebrew word *gibbor*, meaning “strong, mighty,” describes heroes like Nimrod, “a mighty warrior . . . a mighty hunter before the LORD” (Genesis 10:8-9), and the “mighty warriors” of King David of Israel (2 Samuel 23:8). It's a word depicting bravery, courage, and action. All these are qualities of *gibbor* in the compound name *El Gibbor*, “the Mighty God.”

In our war-torn world, we often shrink away from military language to describe God today. But here God reveals himself in words that portray him as a great warrior. Should we shy

away from describing our God that way? Not if that's how he reveals himself.

Both physical and spiritual battles have raged across human history, with conflicts touching everyone who has ever lived. And the name *El Gibbor*, “Mighty God,” points to the day when all of God's enemies, physical and spiritual, will be vanquished and all of creation will bow at the feet of Jesus, the “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Can you think of any greater comfort and confidence as we engage in the battles of our daily lives?

Mighty God, we trust you for peace in our lives and our world, and we long for the day when all your enemies will be defeated. In Jesus' name, Amen.

EL OLAM: “THE EVERLASTING GOD”

Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there he called on the name of the LORD, the Eternal God.

—Genesis 21:33

Abimelek, a local ruler, wanted to make a treaty with Abraham because, as he said, “God is with you in everything you do.” Abimelek played it safe and became an ally of Abraham rather than an enemy. At first glance, this may seem a minor incident in Abraham’s life, but at Beersheba we see that Abraham calls on the LORD as *El Olam*, “the Everlasting God” or “Eternal God.”

The Hebrew word *olam* means “for a long time, always, forever.” *El Olam* thus reveals God as “the Everlasting God,” without beginning or end.

Why would Abraham use the name *El Olam* here? Note that before encountering Abimelek, Sarah had given birth to Isaac, the son God had promised. Abraham saw that God was faithful to his promises from many years ear-

lier. As a reminder that “the Everlasting God” keeps his promises, Abraham planted a tamarisk tree, an evergreen, at Beersheba.

The treaty that followed at Beersheba gives us an example of why Abraham and Sarah are praised in Hebrews 11. They stepped out in faith to obey *El Olam*, “the Everlasting God,” who keeps his promises.

God has eternity in view for you. What can you do today to demonstrate your trust in the Everlasting God?

O God, you are the same yesterday, today, and forever. Help us to trust you in the big and small events of our lives. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

EL HAKKAVOD: “THE GOD OF GLORY”

The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD thunders over the mighty waters. —Psalm 29:3

At Mount Horeb (Sinai), Moses had a breathtaking encounter with God. There he met *El Hakkavod*, “the God of Glory.” Moses asked God to remain with his people Israel. When God promised to do so, Moses, seeking further reassurance, boldly asked, “Now show me your glory.”

The Hebrew word *kavod* originally meant “heavy, weighty,” as in reference to armor used in battle. Over time the word became linked with wealth, honor, dignity, and power, and it eventually came to mean “glory.” All these attributes combine to describe God as *El Hakkavod*, “the God of Glory.”

Eyes of faith see *El Hakkavod* in creation. *El Hakkavod*, “the God of glory,” as revealed in Psalm 29, “thunders over the mighty waters.”

Now, Moses wasn’t satisfied to see God’s glory in nature; he wanted to see God’s face. But because of the weight of God’s glory, his utter uniqueness, perfect holiness, and complete transcendence, no one could see God’s face and live. Even so, God allowed Moses to see his glory after he passed by.

Moses caught a glimpse of God’s glory at Sinai, but today we can see God’s glory in Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). Amazing!

How will God’s glory revealed in Christ transform your life today? How can you reflect God’s significance to those around you?

God of Glory, we worship you in all your splendor and majesty. We see your glory today in the face of our Lord Jesus. Amen.

EL HAKKADOSH: “THE HOLY GOD”

The LORD Almighty will be exalted by his justice, and the holy God will be proved holy by his righteous acts. —Isaiah 5:16

In today's reading from Isaiah, we discover that although God planted a vineyard with “the choicest vines,” the vineyard “yielded only bad fruit.” Through Isaiah, God speaks bitterly here about the spiritual decline of Israel and the consequences of rejecting him.

Why does God get so upset about Israel's disobedience? He is angry because of who he is: *El Hakkadosh*, “the Holy God.” This name for God comes from the Hebrew word *kadosh*, meaning “one of a kind, utterly unique, set apart, holy.” Isaiah uses this name at least 30 times throughout his book.

Showing himself as *El Hakkadosh*, God reveals himself to Israel as completely upright or righteous. He walks a straight path. His exalted moral character sets him apart from the gods of the surrounding nations. He

is not merely a useful dispenser of wishes and desires but is holy in and of himself. Because he is holy, God expects, even demands, that his people Israel be holy too.

So *El Hakkadosh*, “the Holy God,” became outraged when his “beloved vineyard,” his children Israel, produced only sour grapes. They had become corrupt and unrighteous.

In and through Jesus Christ, who is the true vine (John 15:1), we too are set apart for the Holy God. May we, by the power of his Holy Spirit, produce good fruit for him!

Holy God, you are perfect in holiness and righteous! Yet you have given your Son to make sinners holy. Help us to live holy lives that produce the fruit of righteousness. Amen.

YAHWEH: “I AM WHO I AM”

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” —Exodus 3:14

Moses’ encounter at the burning bush is a pivotal moment in the Bible. Standing on holy ground in the presence of God, Moses hears God’s deep concern about the suffering of his people in Egypt. The moment also marks the beginning of Moses’ call to lead the people of Israel. Most important, Moses learns the name by which God wants to be known and worshiped by his people—*Yahweh*: “I AM WHO I AM.”

Written with only the consonants *YHWH*, this name was the most sacred name of God to the Israelites. Because they avoided saying this holy name, its exact pronunciation has been lost. Eventually the word for “Lord” was always spoken instead of the proper name, so wherever *YHWH* occurs, our English Bibles today use the word “LORD” (printed with small capital letters).

God tells Moses to tell the Israelites in Egypt that *Yahweh*, “I AM,” has sent him. What does this name mean? Some point to God’s self-existence, not being dependent on anything else. Others highlight God’s immutability, that he is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

While these qualities reveal something about the name “I AM,” they overlook the context of the story. At the burning bush, *Yahweh* reveals his name “I AM” as a declaration: “I will be with you.” *Yahweh*, the covenant God, keeps his promise to never leave or forsake us.

Yahweh, we praise you for your faithfulness to all your people, including us. Help us to live faithfully for you. In Jesus, Amen.

ADONAI: “LORD, MASTER, OWNER”

Abram said, “Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?”
—Genesis 15:2

Calling Abram to leave his homeland, God promised to make him a great nation (Genesis 12:1-2). Awhile later, God promised to make Abram’s offspring “like the dust of the earth,” so many that they could not be counted (13:16). But now years had passed, and Abram still had no offspring.

After Abraham met Melchizedek at Salem (see Genesis 14), God appeared to Abram in a vision. This time, before God made a promise, Abram raised the point that he needed offspring to be a great nation. He doesn’t do this in a cheeky way. He addresses God with utmost respect as *Adonai Yahweh*, “Sovereign LORD.”

Here the Bible combines *Yahweh* with the Hebrew *Adonai*, from the noun *adon*, meaning “Lord, master, owner.” Abram recognizes that God is

his “Sovereign,” and although he doesn’t understand God’s plan, Abram shows that he trusts *Adonai* will keep his promise to make him a great nation.

Just a bit later, when God promises to make his offspring as numerous as the stars of the heavens, we read that Abram believes. Seeing Abram’s wholehearted trust, God credits it “to him as righteousness.”

If you know God is King of the universe, do you truly trust him with your life? What can you do today to show faith in your Sovereign Lord?

Sovereign Lord, so often we fail to understand your ways. Help us to bow before you and to trust you completely, our Lord and Master. Amen.

YAHWEH YIREH: “THE LORD WILL PROVIDE”

So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, “On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.”

—Genesis 22:14

The scene on Mount Moriah is one of the most dramatic in the Old Testament. There God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, the link between Abraham and God’s promise to make him into a great nation.

Why make such a demand? Abraham’s neighbors expected their gods to demand human sacrifice. God uses that expectation to test Abraham’s faith, to see his obedience in action.

Against all doubt, Abraham obeys, believing that somehow God will provide. In agony, Abraham readies the altar and raises the knife to plunge it into Isaac’s chest. Suddenly, calling from heaven, the angel of the LORD says to Abraham, “Do not lay a hand on the boy. . . . Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son.”

Out of gratitude for God’s intervention and provision, Abraham names the place *Yahweh Yireh*, “the LORD will provide.” The Hebrew word *yireh* can mean either “to see” or “to provide.” And for us, as for Abraham, both *seeing* and *providing* are what God does. When we were dead in our sins, God *saw* and *provided* for us. He provided Jesus, his only Son, to die in our place, paying for our sin.

Live today with the knowledge and comfort that *Yahweh Yireh* *sees* and *provides* for your every need, and let your faith in him flow into obedience.

Lord God, you see our need and provide. You have provided the Savior we need: Jesus Christ, our Lord. Help us to trust in you and to live in obedience to you. Amen.

YAHWEH RAPHA: “THE LORD WHO HEALS”

Praise the LORD, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases.

—Psalm 103:2-3

In the desert at Marah, we have another story of God’s provision and testing. With empty water sacks, standing before a pool of bitter water, the people of Israel begin to grumble. Although they complain bitterly against Moses, they are really complaining against God.

Their grumbling seems very shortsighted. Only a few days earlier God had parted the Red Sea and saved them from Pharaoh’s army! (See Exodus 14-15.) But again, as we see in this story, God delivers his people, making the water fit to drink.

At Marah, the Israelites learn that God is *Yahweh Rapha*, “the LORD who heals.” This name comes from the Hebrew word *raphe*, meaning “to heal, to make healthy.” The people also learn that God expects his people to trust him in all things, and

he expects them to be holy, as he is holy. Indeed, a few chapters later at Sinai, he lays out a code for holy living.

In the New Testament we discover an irony about *Yahweh Rapha*. There we learn that “the LORD who heals” suffers to heal us and to forgive our sins. In the words of Isaiah 53:5, “He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities.” These words refer to Jesus, the Son of God. “By his wounds we are healed.”

May you have peace today, knowing that all your sins have been forgiven.

O God, you are the one who heals. Through your Son, Jesus, we have been healed and forgiven. Help us to live fully with this assurance. Amen.

YAHWEH NISSI: “THE LORD IS MY BANNER”

Moses built an altar and called it The LORD is my Banner.

—Exodus 17:15

The Israelites' victory over the Amalekites has long captured the imaginations of children. While Moses held up his arms, the Israelites were winning, but when Moses's arms drooped, the Amalekites overpowered Israel. Finally, with Aaron and Hur supporting Moses' arms, the Israelites triumphed over the Amalekites.

Many adults find this story puzzling, even troubling. After Amalek is defeated, God tells Moses to record the event, because, he says, “I will completely blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven.” No easy answers come to mind to explain this sober ending.

After the battle, Moses builds an altar, calling it *Yahweh Nissi*, “The LORD is my Banner.” The Hebrew word *nissi* comes from *nis*, meaning “banner.” Ancient armies often attached a ban-

ner or a flag to a pole as a focal point and a rallying sign for their troops engaged in battle. For Moses and the Israelites, their first battle on the way to the promised land showed that God was their banner. He called his people to rally to him. The Lord went before his people, protecting them and triumphing over their enemies.

In the very real spiritual battles we fight every day, including the command to love our enemies, let's remember *Yahweh Nissi*, “the LORD is our banner.” And his banner over us, through Jesus Christ, is love.

O God, your banner over us is love. Help us to keep our focus on you in our daily spiritual battles. Help us to do this as instruments of your peace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

YAHWEH SHALOM: “THE LORD IS PEACE”

Gideon built an altar to the LORD there and called it The LORD Is Peace.
—Judges 6:24

Today’s reading takes place in a strange setting. People usually threshed grain in the open, where the wind could blow away chaff from the grain being tossed up in the air. But Gideon worked under the cover of a winepress. Gideon and all his people feared the Midianites, who often came to raid their land and ruin their crops.

Hiding in the winepress, Gideon meets a visitor, “the angel of the LORD [*Yahweh*],” who ironically assures him, “The LORD is with you, mighty warrior.”

This encounter initiates Gideon’s call to be God’s deliverer of his people from the Midianites. At the end of this story, Gideon builds an altar, calling it *Yahweh Shalom*, “The LORD is peace.” Gideon uses this name for God in response to a word of assurance: “Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to

die.” *Shalom*, the Hebrew word for “peace,” refers to “completeness, soundness, flourishing, well-being.” Gideon needs this assurance not because he fears the Midianites, but because he has seen the angel of the Lord face to face.

Throughout Scripture, fear is the normal reaction to seeing God’s messengers. Sinners cannot endure God’s holiness. Yet, if we have come to know Jesus, we too have seen the face of God (see John 14:6-7). Instead of reacting with fear and terror, though, we can say, “*Yahweh Shalom*, ‘The LORD is our peace.’” May you rest in the Lord’s peace today and always.

God of Peace, in your Son we have seen your glory. Help us to serve as you call us to, knowing that you are our peace. Amen.

YAHWEH MEKODDISHKEM: “THE LORD WHO SANCTIFIES YOU”

“You must observe my Sabbaths . . . so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy.”
—Exodus 31:13

There’s little agreement today about how to observe the Lord’s Day. Some Christians keep a tight rein on Sunday observance, while others view it more lightly. With such diverse views, what should we make of the Sabbath-day commands given to the people of Israel?

Any attempt to answer should focus on the meaning of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was a sign to the Israelites that God is the Creator. Resting from their labor was (and still is) a way of saying, “God reigns.” Further, keeping the Sabbath was a sign that God’s people were striving to be holy, like their God.

In Exodus 31 we learn that *Yahweh Mekoddishkem*, “the LORD who sanctifies you,” had made his people holy. *Mekoddishkem* comes from the Hebrew word *qadash*, meaning “set apart, consecrated, sancti-

fied, prepared, dedicated, hallowed, made holy.”

Just as observing the Sabbath was important for the Israelites, observing the Lord’s Day is important for us. It’s a reminder of God’s lordship over all things and every day, and it shows that we belong to him.

However the Holy Spirit convicts you to keep the Lord’s Day, remember that *Yahweh Mekoddishkem* is “the LORD who sanctifies you.” Then you will live accordingly every day of the week.

Holy God, Creator and Sustainer of all things, you have set us apart for yourself. Help us to strive to be holy and live for you. Through Jesus, Amen.

YAHWEH SABAOTH: “THE LORD OF HOSTS”

David said . . . “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel. . . .” —1 Samuel 17:45

David’s triumph over Goliath is one of the best-known stories of the Bible. An agile lad with a few smooth stones defeats a giant, armored warrior decked out with heavy weapons. It’s a story of contrasts and ironies: tall versus short, strength versus weakness, arrogance versus humility, glorious victory versus humiliating defeat. We savor the triumph of the underdog.

But this impressive story isn’t mainly about David and Goliath. The core conflict is between the false gods of the Philistines and the God of Israel, *Yahweh Sabaoth*, “the LORD of Hosts” or “the LORD Almighty.”

Yahweh Sabaoth is one of the most widely used names for God in the Old Testament, occurring nearly 300 times. The name *Sabaoth* comes from the Hebrew word for “that which goes forth” and for “armies”

or “hosts.” The name *Yahweh Sabaoth* declares God’s reign over heaven and earth and over all armies, earthly and spiritual.

David, understanding the real conflict, declares that “the battle is the LORD’S.” And through him, *Yahweh Sabaoth*, “the LORD of Hosts,” defeats the mighty Philistine and his gods.

A hymn of the church sings, “Lord Sabaoth his name, from age to age the same”—and we can rely on his strength in our daily battles.

Lord of Hosts, help us to rely on your strength to wage the battles we face each day against our own trials and temptations. We ask this in Jesus’ precious name. Amen.

YAHWEH RA'AH: "THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD"

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

—Psalm 23:1

The Lord told Ezekiel to prophesy against the “shepherds of Israel” (Ezekiel 34:2). The religious leaders of Israel had been seeking their own advantage rather than taking care of the people of Israel, their flock. God lashed out against this corruption.

Sheep and shepherds are common metaphors in the Old Testament. God is often mentioned as the shepherd of his people Israel. Only once, though, do we find the name *Yahweh Ra'ah*, meaning “The LORD is my shepherd” (Psalm 23:1).

The Hebrew word *ra'ah*, meaning “shepherd,” describes one who tends, leads, feeds, and protects his flock of sheep. As a shepherd cares for his flock, so *Yahweh Ra'ah* cares for his people, providing for all their needs and guiding and protecting them. *Yahweh Ra'ah* cares for his

covenant people as a flock and as individual, precious sheep.

The closing verses of Ezekiel 34 make clear the magnificent ways in which *Yahweh Ra'ah* promises to care for his sheep. He doesn't disappoint. And in the New Testament, Jesus proclaims himself to be *Yahweh Ra'ah*, saying, “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:14).

The Lord is your good shepherd. Lean on him, for he protects and provides and cares for you.

Good Shepherd, you provide for our needs, guide, and protect us. Help us to take comfort in your care today and always. Amen.

YAHWEH TSIDKENU: “THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS”

“Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The LORD Our Righteous Savior.”

—Jeremiah 33:16

Do you ever find the book of Jeremiah difficult to read? It has many bleak passages about judgment and exile for God’s people, who relentlessly disregarded their covenant Lord. The people were constantly unfaithful to their faithful God, *Yahweh*. Today’s reading is set within that dreary context, but the content of the chapter is anything but depressing.

Though confined in the court of the king’s guard (see 32:2; 33:1), Jeremiah proclaims a bright future for the people of Judah. God promises healing and health, forgiveness of sins, and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. The city will be restored for all nations to see, and it will be called *Yahweh Tsidkenu*, “The LORD Our Righteousness.”

Tsidkenu stems from the Hebrew word *tsedek*, meaning “stiff,”

“straight,” or “righteousness.” It occurs more than a thousand times in the Old Testament, translated variously as “right,” “righteous,” “righteousness,” “just,” “justify,” and “declared innocent.” It appears here as *Yahweh Tsidkenu*, “The LORD Our Righteousness,” or “The LORD Our Righteous Savior.” In this prophecy of restoration, we catch a glimpse of “a righteous Branch . . . from David’s line,” the one through whom we are justified, declared innocent, made right with God.

Knowing that Jesus is your righteousness, live righteously today and always.

Righteous God, thank you for making us righteous through Jesus. Help us to live righteously for you. Amen.

HO THEOS: “GOD”

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”

—Revelation 1:8

Rabbinic Jews reject the claim that *Yahweh*, the God of the Old Testament, is the Christian God. But although God reveals himself in far fewer names in the New Testament, he still claims to be *Yahweh*, the God who revealed himself to Israel.

The main name for God in the New Testament is *Ho Theos*, from the Greek noun for “god.” This name occurs more than 1,000 times in the New Testament. *Theos* can mean “god” or “goddess,” so it was also used as a general name for false deities. To avoid confusing God with the many Greek gods, the Jewish writers of the New Testament called him *Ho Theos*, “the God,” stressing that he alone is the true God.

Is *Ho Theos* of the New Testament the same as *Yahweh* of the Old Testament? The apostle John, who wrote Revelation, clearly

believed that *Yahweh* was the same God in both Testaments. “Alpha and Omega” and “Almighty” echo God’s names and attributes revealed in the Old Testament. Even more significant, John’s words “who is, and who was, and who is to come” provide another way of describing *Yahweh*, “I AM WHO I AM” (Exodus 3:14).

The same God who revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush is the God proclaimed in the New Testament. As “I AM” promised to be with his people of old, he promises to be with us today.

O God, you are the same yesterday, today, and forever! Help us to live by this eternal truth, by your grace, and for your glory. Amen.

HO BASILEUS TON ETHNON: “KING OF THE NATIONS”

“Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the nations.”

—Revelation 15:3

In a vision of heaven, John sees the victorious saints standing before a glassy sea. With harps in their hands, they sing the song of Moses and the Lamb. They offer highest praise to the “Lord God Almighty,” to *Ho Basileus tōn Ethnon*, “King of the Nations.”

The name *Ho Basileus tōn Ethnon* highlights God as *basileus*, meaning “leader of the people, prince, commander, lord of the land, king.” He isn’t the petty ruler of a minor state, but the King of *all* of the *ethnos*, “nations, tribes, and people groups” across time and space.

This scene by the sea of crystal is a climax moment in salvation history. *Ho Basileus tōn Ethnon*, “King of the Nations,” triumphs over and destroys his enemies. Throughout history the people of the earth have obstinately re-

jected God’s claim as Ruler over heaven and earth. When God’s glory and righteousness are completely revealed, all nations and peoples of the earth will come and bow down before his throne and worship him.

Does history often seem out of control, lurching toward destruction? Don’t fear or lose hope. *Ho Basileus tōn Ethnon*, “King of the Nations,” will prevail. We have this assurance in Jesus’ victory over sin and death. Live and serve today in that confidence and hope.

O King of the Nations, we bow before you and look to the time when all people will do the same. Until that day, help us to trust and joyfully serve you. Amen.

KYRIOS: “LORD”

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

—Romans 10:13

The most common name for God in the entire Bible is the Greek word *kyrios*, which means “Lord.” Combining its use in the Old Testament (when translated from Hebrew to Greek) and the New Testament (written in Greek), the word *kyrios* for “Lord” appears more than 6,000 times!

The word *kyrios* originally meant “power” or “might,” but over time it came to mean “lord” or “master.” When the Old Testament was translated from Hebrew to Greek, it used *kyrios* for “Lord” wherever the words *YHWH* or *Adonai* occurred in the Hebrew text.

The Jewish writers of the New Testament, who were likely raised reading Scripture in both Hebrew and Greek, similarly used *kyrios* whenever they referred to *Yahweh* and *Adonai*. Further, they used *kyrios* in a

radically new way, declaring that Jesus also is Lord. In Romans 10, for example, Paul uses *kyrios* in a discussion about Jesus, quoting Joel 2:32, which states, “Everyone who calls on the name of *Yahweh* will be saved.” Paul uses *kyrios* in this passage to refer to both Jesus and *Yahweh* as Lord, declaring that both are the one true God. In this example we see the central teaching of the Bible, built on this foundational truth: Jesus is Lord!

Bow to him today and worship him! Jesus is your Lord and your God!

Lord God, we worship you with wonder for your mysterious and majestic plan of salvation. In our amazement and awe, help us to trust you and to call on your precious name. Amen.

DESPOTES: “MASTER”

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace.”
—Luke 2:29

When Joseph and Mary come to the temple in Jerusalem to present Jesus to be consecrated, they meet Simeon, a “righteous and devout” man. Simeon has been waiting a long time to see the promised Messiah, and now he knows that the “consolation of Israel” has come. Taking the baby Jesus in his arms, Simeon praises God, addressing him as *Despotes*, “Sovereign Lord.”

The name *Despotes* occurs only a few times in the New Testament, both as a name for God and a name for Jesus. *Despotes*, “Sovereign Lord,” comes from a Greek word meaning “one who has unlimited power or authority based on supreme ownership.” Our negative-sounding English word “despot” originates from this term, but the Greek word merely stresses the undisputed, absolute power of the master. As a name for God, it stresses that all of creation belongs to him.

In relationships, the counterpart of *despotes*, “Sovereign Lord” or “Master,” is *doulos*, meaning “servant,” “bondservant,” or even “slave.” The servant Simeon, entrusted by *Despotes*, the “Sovereign Lord,” watched and waited for the coming Messiah, to announce his arrival. Laying eyes on the child Jesus, he knew he now saw the Lord’s salvation.

What has the Sovereign Lord entrusted you to do? Are you yielding to his authority and carrying out that calling to the best of your ability?

Sovereign Lord, you call each of us to serve you. Prompt us with your Spirit to serve you devoutly and righteously in all we do today. Amen.

THEOU PATROS: “GOD THE FATHER”

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God . . . To Timothy, my dear son: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.
—2 Timothy 1:1-2

In the letter-writing format of his day, Paul typically identified himself before greeting the recipient of his message. In addition, Paul almost always used a greeting like this: “Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.”

“Father” is one of God’s most important names in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, God as “Father” occurs sparingly and only as a metaphor for God’s relationship to his people. In the Greek New Testament, writers used *Theou Patros*, “God the Father” as one of God’s most prominent names. *Patros*, drawing from terms that refer to “nourishing, protecting, upholding,” means “father,” “generator,” or “male ancestor.”

Paul, like other New Testament writers, uses this name, *Theou Patros*, not only in greetings but

also in doxologies, thanksgivings, prayers, and exhortations. This name describes God’s place as the first person of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and God’s role as creator and sustainer of the universe and as owner of his kingdom unfolding in history. No wonder Paul so often included *Theou Patros*, “God the Father,” in his greetings.

God the Father greets you today and every day with his grace, mercy, and peace. What better opening could we ask for each new day?

Father God, we worship you as creator and sustainer of all things. Thank you for stooping to bless us with your grace, mercy, and peace. Amen.

PATROS MOU: “MY FATHER”

“My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.”
—John 5:17

God as “Father” is a prominent theme in the New Testament. In John’s gospel alone, the name “Father” appears more than a hundred times. Out of that number, Jesus calls God *Patros mou*, “my Father,” almost thirty times.

Just its number of occurrences makes “my Father” an important name for God. But this is also a distinct name that only Jesus could use because of his unique relationship with God the Father. This refers not to the usual way of human generation but to the fact that Jesus was “begotten, not made,” as we confess in the Nicene Creed.

In claiming God as *Patros mou*, Jesus states his oneness with his Father: that he loves his Father, honors his Father, obeys his Father, does his Father’s will, speaks his Father’s words, and carries out his Father’s mission.

The Jewish religious leaders understood clearly. They realized that in saying *Patros mou*, “my Father,” Jesus claimed to be equal with God. In response, they were outraged and plotted to kill him.

Because Jesus could rightly address God as *Patros mou*, “my Father,” we have the right to be called children of that same Father—adopted children, but children nonetheless. (See John 1:12-13; Rom. 8:14-17.)

Keep in mind today that Jesus’ Father is your loving Father too.

Our Father in heaven, through Jesus, your Son, we belong to you. By your Spirit’s power, help us to live as Jesus lived in relation to you, in thanksgiving and holiness. Amen.

ABBA HO PATER: “ABBA, FATHER”

The Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” —Romans 8:15

Jesus spoke the everyday language of his people: Aramaic. So instead of saying “Pater” (in Greek) for “Father,” Jesus would say “Abba” (in Aramaic).

In Mark 14:36 we find both the Aramaic and the Greek for “Father” as Jesus prayed, “*Abba ho Pater*” (literally, “Abba, the Father”), at Gethsemane. There he agonized over the suffering he would face for our sins, and he asked his “Abba, Father” to take that responsibility from him. In this way Mark portrays Jesus’ agony as well as his intimacy with God the Father.

The apostle Paul uses the words *Abba ho Pater* also—in Romans 8 and Galatians 4. In our reading for today, he uses it to state that because we are adopted as God’s children, we must live as God’s children.

Some people mistakenly say that *Abba* suggests we can call

God “Daddy.” But everyone from little children to adults in Jesus’ day used *Abba* for “Father.” Still, following Jesus’ example, we can say “Abba, Father” to express intimacy with God. For Jesus and for us, “Abba, Father” is prayer language. In prayer we enter God’s presence, submitting to his will, knowing that he cares for us and knows us intimately. And, like Jesus, we can also say, “Not what I will, but what you will.”

Let Jesus’ will to obey “Abba, Father” fill your heart as you face the challenges of this day.

Abba, Father, we enter your presence because through Jesus you have made us your children. Help us to seek your will today and always. Amen.

THEOS HEMON PATER: “GOD OUR FATHER”

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.
—Romans 1:7

At the beginning of the book of Romans, we find Paul’s usual identification of himself along with his greeting to all his readers. In this greeting, Paul refers to God as *Theos hemon Pater*, “God our Father.”

Hemon Pater, “our Father,” occurs in different ways in the New Testament. Throughout the gospels, we hear this phrase on the lips of Jewish religious leaders. When they use the phrase, it refers to an ancestor, such as Abraham or David. In Romans, Paul also uses “our father” to refer to Abraham.

In the greetings of his letters, though, Paul specifies that *hemon Pater*, “our Father,” refers to God. The greeting is from the God who made the heavens and the earth, who poured out his grace on us through his Son, Jesus. Through Jesus, we also receive our Father’s peace, which

“transcends all understanding” (Philippians 4:7). A wonderful greeting, indeed!

Another use of *hemon Pater* occurs when Jesus teaches us to pray, “Our Father in heaven” (Matt. 6:9) in the Lord’s Prayer.

In yet another passage we learn that Jesus also intercedes for us in prayer (Romans 8:34). We confess this when we say Jesus is “seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty” (Apostles’ Creed). On this Ascension Day, when you pray, “Our Father,” take comfort and assurance in knowing that Jesus intercedes on your behalf.

Our Father in heaven,
thank you that in Jesus
Christ we have an inter-
cessor at your right hand.
Thank you for the assur-
ance that you hear and
answer our prayers. Amen.

HO PATER TON OIKTIRMOS: “THE FATHER OF MERCIES”

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort. . . .

—2 Corinthians 1:3

In this densely packed prayer, Paul praises God as the God and Father of Jesus Christ and as *Ho Pater tōn Oiktirmos*, “the Father of mercies.” The Greek word *oiktirmos*, expressing “compassion, pity, mercy,” literally means “to have a stomach ache for the object of one’s compassion.”

Surprisingly, even though Paul and his coworkers suffered in their work to spread the good news of Jesus, Paul didn’t complain or ask God to remove their suffering. Instead, he acknowledged God’s compassion in the midst of their suffering. Actually, Paul didn’t see suffering as apart from God’s will, but somehow as a *part* of God’s will for himself and his fellow laborers. Most remarkably, Paul described God as *Ho Pater tōn Oiktirmos*, “the Father of mer-

cies,” who comforts us in our afflictions.

What kind of Father is this who allows his children to suffer? We suffer because of sin and its effects in this world. But Paul reminds us that in our suffering *Ho Pater tōn Oiktirmos* comforts us through Jesus Christ, who, after all, suffered and died *for* us, paying the debt of our sin.

Are you suffering? Take comfort and courage that “the Father of Mercies” cares for you. And because he cares for you, you can care for others.

Father of Mercies, help us to see your goodness in joy and sorrow, well-being and suffering, and to know your comfort and share it with others. In Jesus, Amen.

CAST ALL YOUR CARES ON HIM

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

—1 Peter 5:7

As we have seen this month, God reveals himself in a remarkable number of names. These names hint at many different aspects of God's character that are important for understanding God.

We learn God's names in the assurance and deliverance he provides to Abraham, to Hagar, to Moses, to Gideon, to many others, and to all his people together in the Old and New Testaments. The Creator God of the universe, supreme over all he has made, doesn't remain aloof. He stoops down again and again to meet his people, especially in their darkest times and in their deepest need. And, in the process, he reveals himself in the names he gives.

Practically speaking, what should we do with the names of God? Learning the names of God should drive us to our

knees, worshiping his majesty and his holiness. Learning God's names should also give us great comfort and assurance.

Focusing on just the details, though, could distract us from how God reveals himself to the people in the Bible and to us. We learn who God is through his interactions with real people, like you and me. God reveals himself most clearly in times when his people stand in need of his presence and his intervention.

Be assured most of all that you can cast all your cares on God each day. Your heavenly Father cares for you.

Our Father, thank you for revealing your many names that show your grace and glory. Help us to honor your name in all we do and say. Amen.

this month

Toward a New Creation

Arthur J. Schoonveld

This month's devotions will take us from the first verse in the Bible, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1), all the way to God's promise in Revelation 21:5: "I am making everything new!"

We'll take a look at the goodness of God's creation, the consequences of our sin, how you and I are faced with the reality of death every day, and what God did to pick up the pieces of a ruined creation. We'll also see how God wants to use us in building his kingdom here on earth. Then we'll look at Christ's second coming, the final judgment, and the restoration of all things. In spite of what we may experience today, through it all our Lord is moving history toward a new creation!

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

IN THE BEGINNING

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. . . . And God saw that it was good.
—Genesis 1:1, 25

Last summer our family had the privilege of spending four days in the Bahamas. On the last day of our vacation, while sitting on a small island lined with palm trees, enjoying a cloudless sky above us and the blue water of the ocean in front of us, I was reminded of the beauty of God's creation and of the words of today's text: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

But we shouldn't need a trip to the Bahamas to remind us that all creation comes from God's hand. As you travel, or sit in your backyard, or enjoy a beautiful park this summer, take the time to remember that this is God's creation, entrusted to our care and given for our enjoyment. Then recall the words of Psalm 19:1: "The heavens declare the glory of God."

Sadly, God's beautiful creation has been tainted by our sin. In many parts of our world it's clear that people have polluted the land and harmed all kinds of plant and animal life. But no human carelessness, no natural disaster, no scientific breakthrough or theory will ever be able to contradict the truth of Genesis 1:1, which tells us in plain language that it was God himself who created the heavens and the earth.

Wherever you find yourself this summer, remember that this is God's creation, and be assured that he is moving history toward a new creation.

Father in heaven, help us to praise you for your marvelous creation. In Jesus' name, Amen.

MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE

God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule. . . ." . . . God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.

—Genesis 1:26, 31

Sometime today take a few moments to look at yourself in a mirror.

When you do, don't look for wrinkles or gray hairs or for things you don't like about yourself. Try to ignore whatever blemishes you see, and, while looking at yourself, say out loud, "I am made in God's image."

We were made to look like God—not physically, but with the ability to love, to choose, and to communicate. Psalm 8:5 tells us we were made "a little lower than the angels and crowned . . . with glory and honor." Psalm 139:14 adds that we are "fearfully and wonderfully made" by God himself.

Perhaps it's difficult for some of us to believe we are special. Maybe other people have made you feel that you are insignificant and worth very

little. Maybe you are in a stage of life in which you feel useless. Perhaps you are confined to your bed, unable to do the things you want to do. If so, you need to know that you are special no matter what—because you bear God's image.

Because we are made in God's image, he cares about each one of us. Isaiah 49:16 says that we are engraved on the palms of God's hands. He wants to use each one of us in his goal of renewing his creation.

Lord our God, thank you for the honor of bearing your image. Please use each one of us to honor you. Amen.

PARADISE LOST

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good . . . she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

—Genesis 3:6

Several years ago *Time* magazine featured a cover story about the book of Genesis. The writer commented that the book of Genesis is far more than a controversial document about creation v. evolution. The book of Genesis, he said, “is about us and our origins.”

The author had it right. The book of Genesis is all about us and our origins. It tells us who we are and what God intended us to be. It is about God, who created a perfect universe, only to see it plunged into ruin by the disobedience of our first parents. Genesis 3 gives the answer to the question “What happened to God’s beautiful creation? What happened to us who were made in God’s image?”

The chapter explains why bad things happen to good people. It explains tragedies, natural disasters, disease, depravity,

and death. It explains abuse and addictions. It tells us that sin and disobedience caused all that is wrong with this world.

Sin brought shame and fear and selfishness. Sin brought about death. And only God can pick up the pieces of his ruined creation and make things new through the death and resurrection of his Son, the Lord Jesus. Read through Genesis 3, and then turn to John 3:16 to see how God goes about restoring his creation: “God so loved the world that he gave . . .”

Lord, our God, thank you for refusing to let us go and for sending your Son to restore all things. In your name, Amen.

DID GOD LOSE CONTROL?

The creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it. . . . —Romans 8:20

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

Sometimes it seems like that is true. On a typical day, news headlines could report chaos in Cairo; civil war in Syria, with thousands killed and a million children in refugee camps; hunger, poverty, and persecution in many countries; flash floods in Europe; and typhoons in the South Pacific. The list is endless.

There is no doubt that God's beautiful creation is groaning, and God's creatures are groaning because of what is happening everywhere. It raises all kinds of questions: Has God lost control? Does God know and care? And if he does care,

why does he allow bad things to happen?

There is no easy answer to these questions. God gives no explanation. The only way to make sense of what is happening all around us is to have an open Bible handy as we read, hear, or view the news. Make sure that when you check up on the news, you also read the last part of Romans 8 and Isaiah 40. There you will find that even today the Lord is in control of all that's happening and will work out his purposes for us and the world he has made.

Father in heaven, we often wonder about everything that is happening in our world today. Help us to trust that you are in complete control. In Jesus' name, Amen.

HOW GOD PICKS UP THE PIECES

“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

—John 3:16

Some years ago while I was reading Genesis 3 (about Adam and Eve’s fall into sin) at a worship service, a little girl whispered to her mother, “Mom, can’t Adam and Eve go to heaven now?” She understood that something very serious had happened, and she wondered if anything or anyone could undo the damage done on that day.

She asked the right question: Could anyone pick up the pieces of a ruined creation? Or are we faced with the dilemma of an old nursery rhyme: “Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall;/ Humpty Dumpty had a great fall./ All the king’s horses and all the king’s men/ couldn’t put Humpty together again.”

What no one else could do, God did by sending his Son, the Lord Jesus. Through his death and resurrection Jesus ushered in the kingdom of heaven, and

by believing in him we can enter that kingdom.

Years ago a religious magazine printed a cartoon of two people talking to each other, with one person saying, “Talk, talk, talk. That’s all religion ever is—just a lot of talk.” On the next page were drawings of a newborn baby, a cross, and an open grave. Underneath the drawing was the question “You call that talk?”

The creator of the universe refused to let go, and John 3 shows how he went about restoring his creation.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your love that refuses to let go. Lord Jesus, thank you for loving us enough to come to save us. Amen.

UNDERCOVER CEO

Christ Jesus . . . being in very nature God . . . made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.
—Philippians 2:5-7

In a message on the book of Revelation, a preacher noted that the Lord Jesus came to earth as the undercover CEO of the universe, much like a manager who appears in a worker's clothes on the television show "Undercover Boss." According to Philippians 2, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who is God himself, "made himself nothing": "Christ Jesus . . . being in very nature God," became a human being.

This explains why, in the words of John 1:10-11, "the world did not recognize him" and "his own did not receive him." It explains why during Jesus' ministry on earth hundreds of people walked right past him. It also explains why millions of people today refuse to believe in him. The CEO of the universe took on the nature of a servant and became one of us.

But this same Lord, ignored by millions, will someday come again. And on that day, as Philippians 2 puts it, "every knee" will bow "and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord." Tongues that refused to confess his name and knees that refused to bow will have no choice but to acknowledge that Jesus is Lord of lords and King of kings.

Let's pray for that day to come soon.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for making yourself nothing in order to save us. Please hasten the day when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that you are Lord of all. Amen.

CAN WE BE SURE WHO JESUS IS?

John . . . sent his disciples to ask [Jesus], "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" —Matthew 11:2-3

John the Baptist had trusted that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ of God. He had said it more than once: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 3:2). He had pointed to his Lord by saying, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). And on the day he had baptized the Lord, he had heard the voice of God saying to Jesus, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well-pleased" (Mark 1:11).

But now John was in prison. King Herod seemed to have more power than King Jesus. The Lamb of God had done nothing to protect him from Herod's clutches. And John began to wonder, "Is Jesus really who he says he is?" So John sent his disciples to ask Jesus.

Jesus answered by saying that the signs of his lordship were

clear: "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor." These were clear signs that the kingdom of heaven had come, and they pointed toward the day when that kingdom will come in all its fullness.

In case you are not sure about who Jesus is, turn to the gospels and be convinced that Jesus is the Christ, the resurrected Son of the living God.

Father in heaven, give us the grace to believe that Jesus has come and has ushered in the kingdom, and help us to look forward to the day when your kingdom will fully come. Amen.

LOVE NEVER FAILS!

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. . . . Love never fails. —1 Corinthians 13:4-8

Some years ago while planning a memorial service, I asked the family members to tell me what they remembered about their mother. Without hesitation they all agreed that she had shown “unconditional love” throughout her life. She never planted a church or preached a sermon. She could not donate large sums of money to charities. She was never acknowledged for doing a special service project or mission work.

And yet she participated in God’s kingdom-building by showing the love described in 1 Corinthians 13. That kind of love, says Paul, is what really matters—because it is God’s love supplied by the Holy Spirit, whose coming we celebrate today on Pentecost (see Acts 2).

Perhaps you wonder how you could possibly be part of God’s building program here on earth.

Perhaps you are confined to your bed or your wheelchair. Perhaps life’s demands keep you from taking part in ministry opportunities. Perhaps you lack the resources to share with others who are in need.

Paul answers those questions. We can be God’s instruments by displaying the love described in 1 Corinthians 13. Ask the Holy Spirit to pour God’s love into your heart so that you can show his love to the people around you. And when you do, others will see a glimpse of God’s kingdom here on earth.

Spirit of God, fill us with your love so that we can share it with the people around us. Make each of us a partner in building your kingdom here on earth. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.

THE BULLY ON THE BLOCK

People are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.

—Hebrews 9:27

In his book *Six Hours One Friday*, Max Lucado refers to death as “the bully on the block.” The apostle Paul calls death “the last enemy to be destroyed.” Author Joseph Bayly, a father who lost three young children, says that death is “the last thing we talk about.”

Of course! Who wants to talk about death when you’re enjoying life? Who wants to think about something so morbid when you’re all set to live for many years to come? And who wants to be reminded that death could come at any time? Maybe you feel like the young man who, after I had preached about death, said to me, “I don’t come to church to hear about death. I come to church to be uplifted.” Perhaps you feel that way too and wonder why you should read about death on a beautiful summer day when there’s so much in life to enjoy!

The answer is actually quite simple: death is a fact of life that all of us must face someday. Death is no respecter of age or gender or season. We are born, live our lives, and die in the context of eternity. Each of us has an appointment with death that we cannot cancel.

But in spite of all that, Paul urges us to live life to the fullest, because Christ overcame death when he rose from the dead. Death is not the end. That’s the reason we can enter into any day, any week, any season with confidence.

Lord, our God, keep us from being overcome with fear, and help us face the future with confidence because of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Amen.

BUT WHY?

We know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.

—2 Corinthians 5:1

In one of our church's confessions the question is asked, "Since Christ has died for us, why do we still have to die?" Christians have been asking this for centuries. If the Lord Jesus has overcome death, why do we still have to face it? The same confession answers: "Our death does not pay the debt of our sins. Rather, it puts an end to our sinning and is our entrance into eternal life."

Simply put, death for the Christian is a stepping stone into eternal life. The apostle Paul gives a similar answer when he writes, "Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed." And "we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven." Our last enemy becomes God's way of taking us to live with him.

Physical death (and someday our own resurrection) has become God's way of setting us free from all the limitations of life here on earth. Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden so that they would not eat from the tree of life and "live forever" (Genesis 3:22-23). God protected them from forever living here with all the suffering caused by sin.

The troubles we face in this world, especially hardships we may encounter for sharing the good news of Christ, will be far outweighed by the eternal glory of being remade and living with God forever.

Father in heaven, thank you for the eternal promise to set us free from all the effects of sin here on earth. In Jesus, Amen.

IS THAT ALL THERE IS?

When David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep.
—Acts 13:36

Many years ago a popular song asked the question, "Is that all there is?" Is life no more than being born, living a few years here on earth only to face death? More recently, in a book titled *Why Am I Here?*, a Dutch theologian said he was sure that life on earth had no purpose and was no more than a random affair.

Thank God that life on earth is not a random affair and that each life serves a purpose! Thank God he has a plan for each one of us. Read Jeremiah 29:10-14, and be assured that God has a plan and purpose for you. In the words of our text, we are to serve God's purpose in our time.

We must discern and discover God's plan for us by seeking him with all our heart.

If you just graduated from high school or college, ask yourself,

"What is God's plan for my life? How can I serve his purpose for my generation? How can I use my gifts and talents to build his kingdom?"

If you are in the thick of life, busy with your job and family, ask yourself, "Is what I am doing today what God wants me to do? Am I glorifying God?"

And if you are retired, ask God to show you how he wants to use you to serve his purpose in your retirement.

God's purpose for our lives is to glorify him, taking part in building his kingdom here on earth.

Father in heaven, show us the plan and purpose you have for us. Use us to build your kingdom. In Jesus' name, Amen.

GOD'S KINGDOM IN OUR MIDST

"The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in your midst." —Luke 17:20-21

Responding to a question about the kingdom of God, Jesus gave a rather startling answer. He told his listeners that the kingdom of God was "in [their] midst," meaning that it was present because Jesus himself was there among them. Today, because Christ is present in us through the Holy Spirit, we can bring the presence of God's kingdom wherever we are.

If you are a teacher in a classroom, your presence means that God's kingdom is there. Wherever you may be vacationing this summer, you are bringing a part of that kingdom. Whether you spend your days driving a truck, working in an office, or providing health care in a hospital, the kingdom of God goes with you. If you are confined to a bed, God's kingdom is present there.

Years ago a theologian named Abraham Kuyper pointed out that every square inch of the universe belongs to our Lord. And you and I are called to make a difference for Christ in this world, his world.

Perhaps you wonder how you could possibly make a difference for Christ. Perhaps you feel that because of who you are and because of your circumstances, your influence is small and insignificant. If so, remember what Jesus said to his disciples, that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed: small, but with tremendous potential (Luke 13:18-19). May his kingdom come!

Lord Jesus, help us to realize that you are with us wherever we go, and use us wherever we may find ourselves. Amen.

THE RICH FOOL

"[The rich man said,] 'I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"
But God said to him, 'You fool!'"

—Luke 12:19-20

A fool! That's what God calls the person in today's parable.

That may seem a strange way to describe someone who would have been the envy of many people in the community. The man had worked hard, putting in long hours, and it had paid off. He was set to enjoy the fruit of his labors. He was going to "take life easy" and "eat, drink and be merry."

When you work hard all your life and you have built a successful business or career, along with some good investments, haven't you earned the right to take life easy and enjoy your retirement? That's how the rich man reasoned with himself.

The Bible makes clear that God does not begrudge his people the rewards of a life well lived. He does not call the man a fool because he was rich. God was

the one who allowed him to be successful. God called the man a fool because he had stored up things only for himself. Instead of recognizing God's blessing and working to build God's kingdom, he had been building his own.

Many people are like the rich fool, willing to sacrifice almost anything to get ahead, trusting in money and status for their security and leaving God out of the picture. Take a few moments today and ask yourself, "Would God call me a fool?"

Lord our God, help us to take a look at our lives, and give us the grace to be rich toward you. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

SHARING FROM OUR ABUNDANCE

“Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.’” —Luke 16:25

Some years ago, after spending a few days in Haiti and walking through areas of extreme poverty, I read the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Then a scary thought came to me: Could I and many other people in Western nations be living like the rich man in the parable? Am I living in the greatest of luxuries, while people like Lazarus are lying at my doorstep in great need, but I am doing nothing to help?

Perhaps we are not ultra-rich, but in North America and other wealthy lands most of us have much more than our basic needs supplied. In spite of a sliding economy, many of us have more than enough: nice homes with lots of conveniences, plenty to eat, enough water to keep our lawns green, vehicles to get us around, and a wardrobe for every season.

Compared to millions of people living in underdeveloped countries, we are rich!

The question for us is “What are we doing for the poor?” Do we share with them from the abundance we have received from God? As coworkers of Christ, do we realize that Jesus calls us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and give water to the thirsty? He even says that whatever we do for people like these, we do for him (see Matthew 25:31-46). In this way God gives us many opportunities to help build his kingdom.

Lord, teach us to share with and help people who are in need. If our hearts need changing, please change us, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

LIVING LIFE FOR THOSE WHO ARE LEAST

“Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”
—Matthew 25:40

A news story last year highlighted an 18-year-old college student who was killed while crossing a road. According to the story, she had lived her short life reaching out to many who are often considered “least” in our society. At a school prom, she danced with someone who had been standing alone because he was “different.” On some of her vacations she was actively involved in an overseas orphanage.

Volunteering at a community program, I had the opportunity to observe high school and college-age young adults who spent part of their summer vacation mentoring young adults with special needs. It was a treat to see them reach out to people who are often considered “least.” They were putting Jesus’ words into practice.

I know too about many retirees who give hours and hours

of their time to volunteer, to share, and to make themselves available to people who need help. One couple logged 75,000 miles in their vehicle while working for a church organization. Many other retirees, no longer able to get around, reach out by praying for underprivileged people or by sending cards and gifts to those who need them.

This is the calling of people who know the kingdom of God is within them: to use the gifts we have in order to serve everyone as we would serve Christ himself.

Lord Jesus, forgive us for the times we have walked past people whom we have judged to be “least.” Thank you for those who have stopped to help. Amen.

WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN?

The angel . . . said, "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior." "Pardon me, my lord," Gideon replied, "but if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us?"

—Judges 6:12-13

How would you answer this question: "If you had the opportunity, what would you like to ask God?" Maybe you'd say, "I'd want to ask why God allows so much suffering."

Gideon asked the same question thousands of years ago. Why do some people face one tragedy after another, while others enjoy all kinds of blessings? Why do some nations enjoy peace and prosperity, while others face poverty, persecution, and even genocide? How can a God who loves this world enough to send his Son allow holocaust and hunger, death and destruction? How can a God who cares so much about his creation allow human hands to destroy his beautiful world? In the words of a Jewish rabbi, "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

Are people right when they say that with so much suffering there cannot possibly be a loving, caring God? Did the wife of Job have it right when she advised him to "curse God and die" (Job 2:9)?

There is no easy answer to the problem of pain. We may never understand, but we do know that God gave his Son to save us from our sin and all its destructive effects in this world (including suffering). We know that God himself suffered in our place. We can be assured that he cares more about us than we will ever know.

Father in heaven, we pray for your grace and mercy for all who suffer. Please give them the assurance that you are with them. In Jesus' name, Amen.

IF JESUS HAD BEEN THERE

“Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”
—John 11:21

When I was 12 years old, my 24-year-old brother was killed in Indonesia. The Sunday after we were told about his death, our pastor preached a message about Jesus raising a widow’s son while she was on her way to bury him. I don’t remember anything about the sermon, but I do remember wondering why Jesus could not have been there on the way to my brother’s grave to raise him from death.

In my own way I was repeating what Martha said to Jesus: “Lord . . . if you had been [there], my brother would not have died.” She did not understand. She had sent word to Jesus that her brother was sick, but instead of coming right away, the Lord waited two days. Martha was convinced that Lazarus would not have died if Jesus had been there.

So many things in life are difficult to understand. Sometimes we wonder if God really was there when someone we loved was taken from us. Sometimes it seems as if, in the words of C.S. Lewis, “God has double-bolted the door to heaven.”

Make no mistake: God is where we are. Even when we cannot see him or find our way to him, he is still there. The Lord Jesus promised his constant presence when he said, “I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). Nothing can separate us from the love of God!

Open our eyes, Lord; we want to see you. Please send us a sign of your presence in our lives. Because of Jesus, Amen.

SHOULD CHRISTIANS BE AFRAID OF DEATH?

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil,
for you are with me.*
—Psalm 23:4

During a mission trip to India, flying from Madras to Mumbai, our plane was caught in a severe thunderstorm. Before we realized what was happening, luggage and food dishes were flying through our cabin. I was convinced that this would be the end of my life, and I began to realize that I was afraid of death.

When I got back home, I told a colleague that I had been afraid to die. He told me that Christians had no reason to be afraid of death. While that is true, I think most of us fear it anyway. Throughout my ministry I have found that many people are afraid to face that last enemy called death. And some ask quite frankly, "Will God accept me when I die?"

Some people are afraid to admit their fear of death. And often those who visit with

people who are dying don't dare to talk about the person's death. A young nurse who was dying sensed that fear in some people who came to see her. She wrote, "Why are you afraid? I know you're insecure, you don't know what to say, you don't know what to do. Just don't run away. All I need is someone to hold my hand."

Don't be afraid to admit your fear. Don't be afraid to talk about it. Take your fear to the Lord, and remember the words of Psalm 23, that the Lord, our great Shepherd, is with you.

Father in heaven, be close to those who are afraid. Reach out to them, reassure them, and help us to do the same. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

DEATH DOES NOT HAVE THE LAST WORD

"Death has been swallowed up in victory." . . . "Where, O death, is your sting?"
—1 Corinthians 15:54-55

In a class of teenagers I asked the question: "What happens when we die?" One student wrote, "I believe that death is not really the end of life. Our soul lives on even after we die. The Bible tells me that when I die I will go and be with my best friend, Jesus Christ, and live with him for eternity."

She had it right: Death is not the end; it is the beginning of eternal life. That's what Jesus said when standing at the grave of his friend Lazarus: "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). The apostle Paul summarizes this way: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

Life on earth is not a one-way journey to the cemetery. As a radio minister said in one of his

messages, "When we die, we go on living on a different plane." We simply change locations.

We can be assured of this because of Jesus' resurrection. As Paul says in his great explanation of the resurrection, "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Corinthians 15:14). Without Christ's resurrection we have no future. But Christ *has been* raised from the dead, and our future is assured. "Death has been swallowed up in victory." And that victory includes our own resurrection in the new heavens and earth. We too shall be raised as Christ has been raised! Hallelujah!

Lord Jesus, thank you for your victory over death and for assuring us that death does not have the last word. Amen.

HOW CAN WE PROVIDE COMFORT?

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

—2 Corinthians 1:3-4

At the beginning of my work in ministry, while I was on my way to visit a family whose son had been killed in Vietnam, the question going through my mind was “What am I going to say?” What could I possibly say to parents who had just received the most devastating news imaginable?

Since that time I have learned that often the less we say, the better. In one of his books Charles Swindoll tells a story about a six-year-old girl whose neighborhood playmate had died. One day she went to visit her friend’s mom. When she came back, she told her mother where she had been. When her mother asked her what she had said, she answered, “I did not say anything. I just sat on her lap and cried a little.”

That little girl understood the secret of what it meant to bring comfort. In his book *Lament for a Son*, author Nicholas Wolterstorff, whose son died in a mountain climbing accident, says, “To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench.”

There will be times when you will sit by the side of a grieving friend. Ask God to help you to come close and become his instrument in bringing his comfort.

Lord God, we often feel helpless and inadequate when people need comfort. Teach us how to give comfort in your name. Amen.

BEFORE JESUS COMES AGAIN

“As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.”
—Matthew 24:37

At one point during his ministry, the Lord Jesus asked, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8). It’s an important question. When Jesus comes again, will people still believe? More and more people seem to be turning their backs on God and the church. A European “theologian” calls faith in a personal God sheer foolishness. He also “knows” that the resurrection never happened and that there is no life after death. Millions of people are buying in to that kind of thinking.

Today’s reading mentions an indifference to the gospel before Jesus comes again. It will be “as it was in the days of Noah,” says Jesus, with people going about their everyday lives without any regard for God.

In 2 Timothy 3:2-5 the apostle Paul writes that in the last days,

“People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive . . . having a form of godliness but denying its power.” False religions, selfishness, and a thirst for material things will rule the day.

I recently heard a pastor mention three tools that Satan uses today to draw people away from God: government, religion, and materialism. He called the church to fight today’s indifference with prayer and by spreading God’s Word. We need to ask ourselves, “What are we doing to bring God’s Word to those who do not care?”

Father in heaven, use each one of us to bring the good news to those who need to hear it. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.

WHEN JESUS COMES AGAIN

“Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. . . . The Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.”

—Matthew 24:42-44

Several years ago, during the war in the Persian Gulf, a billboard along a major highway read, “Be ready! Jesus is coming soon!” Many Christians were absolutely convinced that Jesus was about to come back. *Time* magazine wrote at that time that millions of Americans were preoccupied with the end of the world.

One day while I was driving past that billboard, a teenager riding with me said, “Wouldn’t that be awesome if Jesus came back today?” That comment took me by surprise, coming from a teenager. When I was in high school, I wasn’t so sure that I wanted Jesus to come back right away. I wanted to live life, get out of school, and get married—and Jesus’ second coming would have put an end to all that.

That teenager’s comment raises a question for us all: “Do we *want* the Lord Jesus to come back soon? Would we think it awesome if he came back today, June 22, 2014? Are we praying for his return?”

Regardless of whether we pray for Jesus’ coming or we expect him to come soon, one thing is sure: he will return. The Bible leaves no doubt that someday the Lord Jesus will come back on the clouds of heaven. And when he does, all who believe in him will live with him forever and ever. Let’s pray for that day!

Lord Jesus, please come back soon to bring about the new heavens and the new earth. Come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.

SOON AND VERY SOON?

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise . . . Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

—2 Peter 3:9

“Soon and very soon, we are going to see the King.” We sang that song not long ago at a worship service. The way the people sang it left no doubt that they really believed it.

But how soon? Nearly two thousand years have passed since Jesus told his disciples that he was going to come back. For two thousand years God’s people have been asking, “Lord, when will you return?” But he has not returned.

Already in the first century some believers doubted Jesus’ return. They had believed the promise of his coming, but times were hard and persecution was severe. Scoffers were asking, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised?” They had no answer.

Sometimes we might wonder too. We hear about persecution

and ask, “Why doesn’t Jesus come to end it?” We read about poverty and hunger and deprivation, and we think, “When will it end?” We hear about natural disasters and tragedies, and we wonder why Jesus does not end it all by coming back.

The answer Peter gives is that Jesus has not forgotten about his promise to return. He is “not slow in keeping his promise.” Instead, he is patient! And today God wants his church to call people back to him.

Lord, help us to keep on praying for your return, and while you wait, please use us to call people to repentance. For your name’s sake, Amen.

WILL WE BE RECOGNIZED IN HEAVEN?

There appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

—Matthew 17:3

In a book about going to heaven and then returning to life here on earth, the author tells about being transported to and from heaven after having surgery in a hospital. According to the book, during his short stay in heaven he recognized some of the people he had known earlier in life. Books like *90 Minutes in Heaven* and others tell similar stories about recognizing people who had died earlier.

Will we really recognize each other in the next life? Will we have our own identity, and will family members actually know us? People disagree. In a conversation with some of my siblings I was told that it was simply impossible for us to recognize each other. How could those who left us years ago when we were so much younger possibly know and recognize us?

The Bible, I believe, does tell us that we will know each other. Randy Alcorn in his book *Heaven* cites several Bible passages that would indicate that. In Job 19:26-27, Job says, "In my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes." In today's Bible passage about the transfiguration of Jesus, we meet both Moses and Elijah, who appear in person with the same identity as before.

We have every reason to believe that we will know each other.

Lord, our God, thank you for assuring us that someday we will see you in your glory and be joined with those who have gone before us. Amen.

DO NOT BE AMAZED!

“Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out.”

—John 5:28-29

Do not be amazed! That’s what Jesus says to his disciples as he announces one of the most amazing things that will happen. He tells them not to be amazed when someday every person who has died will come back to life with a new body. The apostle John adds more amazing details when he says in the book of Revelation, “The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them” (Revelation 20:13).

How could we not be amazed? Whenever I have stood in a cemetery conducting a gravesite service, the thought has come to me: “What an amazing day it will be when all these graves are opened and every person will come to life!” It is beyond our comprehension that someday, at the sound of the trumpet, those who have died will

rise from the dead, and even the sea and every other place where people have been buried will give up the dead that are in them.

Of course we stand in awe at that thought. Of course it is beyond our human comprehension. The Lord Jesus wants us to marvel at what will happen someday. But he also wants us to accept it by faith. His resurrection is our guarantee. That’s how we know. Read and reread 1 Corinthians 15 and be assured that he who raised Jesus from the dead will also raise us when he comes again.

Lord Jesus, we marvel, and we stand amazed. Give us the faith to believe. In your name, Amen.

THE FINAL JUDGMENT

We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.

—2 Corinthians 5:10

When Jesus comes again, you and I will find ourselves standing before the judgment seat of God to give an account of how we have lived (Romans 14:12). And all of us deserve a “guilty” verdict, because, as Paul puts it, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). None of us would stand a chance of being acquitted, except for one thing: We have an advocate, someone who speaks to the Father in our defense—“Jesus Christ, the Righteous One” (1 John 2:1).

Zechariah gives us a glimpse behind the scenes to show us what happens when we stand before God’s judgment seat. The high priest, Joshua, is standing before the Lord, dressed in filthy clothes, a symbol of the sinfulness of even the most religious human being. Satan is also standing there to accuse

him. There is nothing Joshua can say to defend himself.

The Lord, however, rebukes Satan and says, “Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?” Then the Lord gives Joshua clean garments and says, “I have taken away your sin.”

The only way you and I can escape God’s judgment is to have the Lord Jesus take our sin upon himself and speak up in our defense. The only thing we must do is believe in him, because “whoever believes in him is not condemned” (John 3:18). The Lord Jesus wants to be our defense, and he’s our only hope. Believe it!

Lord Jesus, thank you for speaking up in our defense so that we may have eternal life. Amen.

THE GREAT MULTITUDE

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

At an outdoor worship service last summer we had a small foretaste of the apostle John's vision described in Revelation. He saw "a great multitude that no one could count," people from every tribe, nation, and language. The service we attended had people from different cultures and countries participating and speaking in different languages. We were reminded that this is God's goal for his church today, to be perfected when he comes again.

The church on earth today is meant to include all kinds of people. In the parable of the great banquet (Luke 14:15-24), the master tells his servants to go out and "bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame." The Lord calls his church to welcome "all who believe" (Romans 3:22).

Perhaps your church needs to ask itself some questions: Do we go out of our way to invite people from different backgrounds? Do we accommodate people who seem different from us? Do we use different languages in worship, if only to remind ourselves we are a church of all nations? Do we go to our local missions and invite the residents to join us at our church? And when they come, do we make them feel at home?

Is your church a small portrait of the multitude in Revelation 7?

Lord our God, forgive us for not going out of our way to invite people who may seem different from us. Help us to be willing to welcome all who need to meet you. Amen.

PARADISE REGAINED

"See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind."

—Isaiah 65:17

In today's verses the Lord gives us a descriptive preview of what life on the new earth will be like when Jesus comes again.

Isaiah's picture of what is in store for us will come as a complete surprise to some. The American writer Mark Twain, who did not believe in life after death, caricatured the life to come as one of the most boring things imaginable. According to Isaiah 65, he and others who think that way could not be more wrong.

The new heavens and new earth will be filled with joy. Instead of being boring, it will be a delight. None of the ugliness of sin will be remembered. Never again will there be the sound of crying. People will go on living and be able to "enjoy the work of their hands." They "will be a people blessed by the LORD."

As a married couple, my wife and I have lived in seven different homes. Each time we moved out, someone else moved in. At every place we lived I planted trees, only to leave them behind for someone else to enjoy. On the new earth we'll build houses and live in them. We'll plant trees and enjoy them when they are full grown. And animal lovers can take heart: every animal God made will live there in peace. Most important, we will live in the presence of and in communion with God in a way we can barely imagine. Paradise lost will be paradise regained!

Lord, thank you for giving us a glimpse of things to come. Please come soon. Amen.

NO MORE CRYING THERE

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

A few years ago my wife and I were standing in a small-town cemetery in the Netherlands, looking at the gravestone of my parents. Below their names is the text “And God will wipe every tear from their eyes.”

There had been much to cry about. Hardships during World War II, with three sons in hiding from the Germans, and a daughter in a German concentration camp. Soon after the war my dad became a widower for the second time, and three years later a son was killed.

There is a lot to cry about during a lifetime. Sooner or later every family and individual will shed tears for one reason or another. It may be the loss of someone we love, the onset of a lingering disease, the limitations that come with getting older, or a lifelong challenge or

disability that keeps us from doing what we want to do.

Whatever causes us to cry, in the words of an old song, the day will come when there will be “no more . . . crying or pain.” The day will come when pain and death and mourning will be gone. Someday, perhaps sooner than we think, God himself will wipe every tear from our eyes. Someday the new Jerusalem will come down from heaven, heaven and earth will become one, and God himself will live with his people. And on that day he will make all things new!

Lord our God, please come soon to make all things new. Because of Jesus, Amen.

TEN THOUSAND REASONS

Praise the LORD, my soul, all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
—Psalm 103:1

Psalm 103 is a song of praise to God for all the benefits and blessings he gives us every day. The psalmist describes many reasons for praising God. The God we serve forgives our sins. He promises to heal all our diseases when he returns. He has redeemed us, crowns us with love and compassion, and assures us that his love is “from everlasting to everlasting” for “those who fear him,” who give God all the honor that is due him.

As New Testament Christians we can add to the reasons we have to praise our God. This month we’ve met the risen Savior. We’ve been able to hear him speak to us in Scripture, and we’ve been reassured that death has been swallowed up in victory. We’ve seen how God wants to use us here on earth to build his kingdom un-

til he comes again. And we’ve received a preview of what lies ahead when all creation will be restored and God himself will make all things new.

As the song “Ten Thousand Reasons” puts it, “For all your goodness I will keep on singing/ Ten thousand reasons for my heart to find.”

What are some reasons you can think of to praise the one true God, the Lord of heaven and earth? In what ways has God worked in your life and in the lives of people you know? Make sure you take the time to praise the Lord today and every day!

Lord our God, fill us with your praises now and forevermore. We praise your holy name, and we thank you. In Jesus, Amen.

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