

Praise Changes Perspective

Stacy Grams Miller

Read

Psalm 50:1–15

“Sacrifice thank offerings...and call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me.”

—Psalm 50:14–15

Several people I know are raising their grandchildren. I have a dear friend whose doctor told her that there is nothing more they can do for her excruciating pain. Another friend is battling stage-four cancer. My pastor and his wife just recently lost a grandchild who was born prematurely. What overwhelming circumstances all these people face!

There is no question about it—life can be hard. Do you ever have a morning where you just want to go back to bed, pull the covers over your head, and hide from the world? What can we do when we want to hibernate from life? What can change our outlook when things seem so bleak?

On my morning drive to work, I have found that verbally praising God for even the smallest things can change my perspective on the day. The more I magnify the Lord, the smaller my troubles become.

How can praising the Lord change your perspective today?

Notes:

Defective Worship

Stacy Grams Miller

Do you ever wonder how portions of the Old Testament apply to you? Today's passage is one of those spots for me. Because *all* of God's Word is profitable, I have learned to pray at those times, waiting on the Lord to reveal how the things I am reading relate to me.

While we are no longer required to offer animal sacrifices or worry about offering a defective animal, we *can* still offer defective worship. When I am singing to God but thinking about my to-do list, what I am having for lunch, or the argument I had with my spouse, I am offering defective worship. We are to worship God in spirit and truth. We do this by focusing on God and him alone.

I'm still working on perfecting this. With my wayward mind, it's going to take some time. But God is patient and willing to help us.

How does your worship need perfecting?

Read

Leviticus 22:17–25

“Do not bring anything with a defect, because it will not be accepted on your behalf.”

—Leviticus 22:20

Notes:

Above Every Other Name

Keena Lighty Wood

Read

Malachi 1:11–14

“My name will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets.”

—Malachi 1:11a

When we hear names such as Mother Teresa, Billy Graham, Martin Luther, and Charles Spurgeon, it evokes admiration, respect, and inspiration in us. We reflect on the deep faith foundations of these people and all that God accomplished through them. However, there are even greater names to consider: Yahweh, Jehovah, Redeemer, Savior, Master, Heavenly Father, Prince of Peace, Counselor, Everlasting Lord, Jesus—and the list goes on. Depending on the source referenced, the Bible identifies over nine hundred different names of God. These names of God reveal the wonderful aspects of God.

Philippians 2:10–11 says, “At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord.” What an honor and privilege it is to serve and worship the God of the universe whose name is above every other name. How great is that?

What names of God are most significant to you and why?

Notes:

Guard Yourself

Keena Lighty Wood

The wounds of broken promises leave long-lasting scars that mar the landscape of our minds and memories. We tend to focus on these scars to the extent that it negatively affects other relationships we have.

How can we prevent or stop this cycle? Today's passage from Malachi suggests that we guard our spirits and do not break faith. What does this look like? To guard your spirit is to not allow your heart to become bitter and hard. Forgive easily and quickly, keeping God as the focus. To not break faith is to honor your promises no matter what, to let your word be your bond and not look for the "loophole" to give you a quick exit.

We cannot do these things alone. God is here to help us and will provide if we only ask. If we cast our cares upon God, he will sustain us (Ps 55:22).

What are ways you can guard your spirit and not break faith?

Read

Malachi 2:10–16

Be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful.

—Malachi 2:16b

Notes:

Read

Malachi 2:17–3:4

Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap.

—Malachi 3:2

Are You Prepared?

Keena Lighty Wood

Several years ago, the *Left Behind* series, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, spurred lively discussion regarding eschatology, which is defined as the part of theology concerned with death, judgment, and the final destiny of the soul and humankind. No matter what each individual believes about this topic, the fact remains that no one knows for sure exactly what will happen and when the Lord will return. Matthew 24:36 tells us that only the Father in heaven knows the day or hour of Jesus' return. Even the angels and Jesus himself do not know when it will happen.

What we do know is that when Jesus returns, he will come to judge the world. We also know that every day we are one day closer to his return. So it might be best to focus on what we are doing to prepare to see Jesus face to face.

How are you preparing for Jesus' return?

Notes:

Open the Floodgates

Keena Lighty Wood

I sometimes wonder why some Christians do not tithe. The Bible states we are to tithe. God doesn't need our money or anything from us to accomplish his will; the purpose of giving is for us to develop our faith and trust in God's provision.

A few years ago my church proclaimed a vision to become debt free. By doing so, they would make more funds available for programs and opportunities within the church, in the community, and in global missions. The generosity of the congregation members, over and above their regular tithes, has not only put us ahead of our debt relief timeline, but God has blessed the church abundantly beyond what we could have imagined.

Giving is a reflection of our level of faith and trust in God to provide. Our generous God wants to pour out so many blessings on our lives—more than we could imagine.

How does your giving reflect your faith and trust in God?

Read

Malachi 3:7–12

“See if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.”

—Malachi 3:10b

Notes:

Whose Kingdom Is It?

Jeffery Scott Wallace

Brad is one of the most humble preachers I've ever known; Elliot is one of the most egotistical.

When he preaches, Elliot talks incessantly about himself in the most glowing terms. After hearing a series of his sermons, you'd get the idea that few have ever been as good a pastor or preacher or husband or father or athlete as Elliot is. After one message in particular, a congregant whispered to me, "That wasn't a sermon; that was a brag-fest." In the end, we came away wondering whether Elliot was preaching God's kingdom or his own.

We never wonder such a thing about Brad. He talks about himself too, but in terms of how he falls short of what God wants him to be—and yet how God's grace is daily transforming him into the image of Jesus. He leaves no doubt that he's humbly preaching the kingdom of Christ.

How can you honor God instead of yourself?

Read

Malachi 2:1–9; 3:5–6

*"I have already
cursed them,
because you
have not resolved
to honor me."*

—Malachi 2:2b

Notes:

Faith's Hall of Fame

Jeffery Scott Wallace

We sometimes tend to think that all the great miracles happened a long time ago. We read in the Bible about people who accomplished amazing feats of faith, and we start to think that our own faith must be weak. But is it? Sure, there were some seemingly astounding successes for those people of faith back then, but many of those people also experienced what we might consider deplorable failures. These men and women of the Bible were human beings like we are with struggles like we have, winning victories and suffering defeats like we do. They had their ups and downs like us; they had faith like we have.

Maybe you're not a standout; maybe you have no distinctive gifts; maybe you're inconspicuous when it comes to having special abilities. But maybe you're doing more good than you know as you share the simple truths of Christ's love.

What effects—large or small—is your faith having on those around you?

Read

Hebrews 11:29–35

“...whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.”

—Hebrews 11:34b

Notes:

Returns of Palm Sunday

Jeffery Scott Wallace

Read

Matthew 21:1–11

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

—Matthew 21:9b

What if the story had ended with Palm Sunday? If the disciples could have hit the pause button on the remote control of life, Palm Sunday would have been a wonderful image to freeze frame.

The problem is that there’s no salvation for anyone on Palm Sunday. The people cried “Hosanna,” which is both a prayer and a praise that for the most part means “Save us, O great one!” But given the world we live in, there could be no salvation from that kind of happy parade. That festive atmosphere doesn’t address the problems that need solving.

The real parades of human history are carnivals of sorrow and festivals of death, which is why Jesus had to die for us. But it’s at this spot that God makes a promise: If we’ll stand devotedly for Christ on Good Friday, we will receive eternal returns for our Palm Sunday prayer.

How can you face the pain of the cross to receive the salvation Jesus offers?

Notes:

What Makes Jesus Mad

Jeffery Scott Wallace

Today's passage presents a side of Jesus we'd rather not deal with. We like a Jesus who teaches us to love our neighbors and takes little children into his arms. We love a miracle worker who heals the sick and answers our prayers. There's something nice and comforting about the baby in the manger, the calmer of storms, and the forgiver of sins. But this story presents a different portrait of our Savior. Jesus gets mad.

Jesus gets mad at profession without prayer. When we lose that vital, first-person connection with God, the wheels of religion may still turn. The hymns may still go up. The rituals may all be kept meticulously. But when praying ceases, the real power is gone—and that makes Jesus good and mad.

That was then and this is now, but the principle remains the same. A lack of prayer breaks our relationship with God.

What are you doing to maintain your connection with the Lord?

Read

Mark 11:15–19

“Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it a ‘den of robbers.’”

—Mark 11:17b

Notes:

Others First

Tammie Edington Shaw

Read

Luke 11:42–44

“Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and respectful greetings in the marketplaces.”

—Luke 11:43

Our pastor designated a particular Sunday for all congregation members to help restock the shelves of our church’s food pantry. Each family unit was to bring a bag of groceries with items from a list of the pantry’s needs. Our pastor also challenged us to buy some of the more expensive brands instead of the discounted items when we shopped. He explained that those who come to food pantries are probably used to getting discards, so he encouraged us to honor and surprise them.

The Pharisees delighted in taking the best seats in the synagogues and loved to be seen. They thought only of themselves and not others. It is so easy to get our eyes on what is best for us and to not think of others. But through the prompting of the Holy Spirit, God can help us change our mindset from me-centered to focusing on others.

What are some simple ways you can put others first?

Notes:

A Call to Serve

Tammie Edington Shaw

My friend Jane is a volunteer at a local youth detention center. Her passion for troubled teens runs deep. Since I don't have the same mission and am a bit introverted to go with her, I have found another way to help. I save all my devotionals and other Christian publications and books and give them to her to take to the center. I believe I can still impact lives in the way God has wired me.

Jesus was a popular speaker, but he served as God called him to. We don't all have to stand in front of a crowd to influence others for Christ. We can ask God to direct us in ways that we can best be used for him. Do you like to bake? or repair cars? or garden? If we have the desire to serve his Kingdom, there will be a place for us.

What are your capabilities that God can use?

Read

Matthew 12:15–21

“He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets.”

—Matthew 12:19

Notes:

He Cares

Tammie Edington Shaw

Read

Isaiah 42:10–17

“I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth.”

—Isaiah 42:16b

I was considering visiting my teenage niece in another city while her school was out. But she wasn't as excited to spend time with her “older” aunt, and I didn't want to put a wedge between us as she tested the waters of young adulthood. I prayed about it but kept fretting and trying to figure it out. Then I fell and sprained my ankle, followed by my husband and I being in a minor auto accident. I needed to stay off my ankle and would be without a car for a while. Then my niece's family told me they were going on vacation for two weeks.

Sometimes obstacles can guide the path before us. I remembered my prayer about what to do, and although I wished some of those things hadn't happened, it reminded me that God is there and cares about us in the big and small things.

How has God answered prayer in an unpredictable manner for you?

Notes:

Open Doors to Serve

Tammie Edington Shaw

A few years ago, refugees from Kosovo came to our area and local organizations asked for donations of household items and furniture to help these people resettle. My husband and I had a couch in our living room that we didn't need, and we donated it. The organization sent a truck and they picked up the piece of furniture from our home.

There are times when we can do small things to assist those who are in need. I was glad to have the chance to help people from another country—a country where I probably will never go.

Isaiah said in his prophecy that Jesus would bring justice everywhere. We might not travel to the far corners of the globe, but we can look for opportunities to help those in need—whether they have always been our neighbors or have come from the other side of the world.

What simple steps can you take to help someone in need?

Read

Isaiah 42:1–9

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

—Isaiah 42:1

Notes:

Stunned into Silence

Jon D. Nutter

Read

Mark 16:1–8

Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

—Mark 16:8

“There are just no words.” That’s a rarity in my experience, but sometimes something stuns me into silence. The glory of a sunset over the Pacific or the majesty of a sunrise in the Cascades might do it. The heartbreak of a teenager in response to the foolish and irrevocable decision of a beloved parent has done it. But these don’t compare to the awe-inspiring encounter of the women in today’s text. They lost their tongues—albeit, only for a short time.

It might be easy and tempting to criticize the silence of the women who went to the tomb. But how arrogant to think that an encounter with an angel wouldn’t stun us into silence as well. Fleeing the scene for the comfort of friends allowed these women to bravely give voice to the message of hope we all need to hear. Words win when fear yields to faith.

How can you find courage to share God’s good news?

Notes:

Who Are You?

Jon D. Nutter

A flashbang is a tactical device used by the military and SWAT teams to make entry into hostile situations by distracting and disorienting the potential assailants with a loud blast and bright light. Flashbang is a fitting image of God's tactic in getting Saul's attention. A blinding light and loud voice completely disoriented the perpetrator, prompting the question we each ask when we encounter Jesus: "Who are you, Lord?"

No matter our occupation or endeavors in life, before we meet Jesus we are his enemies and persecutors. This is the seriousness of our sin and rebellion. We are a danger to ourselves and others, but God chose to go to great lengths to intervene. He sent in the ultimate operator to rescue and redeem. Few of us might get the full sound and light show, but all of us can hear from Jesus in the midst of life's disorienting circumstances.

How did Jesus first get your attention? How do you stay attentive to him?

Read

Acts 9:1–9

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

—Acts 9:5a

Notes:

The Gift of Forgiveness

Jon D. Nutter

Read

Romans 5:12–17

*The gift is not like
the trespass.*

—Romans 5:15a

I was guilty. I ran. Then I got reported, sort of. A couple of phone calls in my town, and your parents knew your crime before you ever got home. My crime? Trespassing.

It was supposed to be all in good fun, but it became a dangerous situation. Out on a lark in the dark, I made a mistake. I didn't pay with my life. The owner extended grace to me, even as he reported me to my dad. There were still consequences to my behavior: fear, shame, restriction, and an apology to the one I had violated. But the gift was different from the trespass. Though I deserved far worse, the one I sinned against patiently and kindly forgave me. My dad restored me by gentle correction. All of this pointed me to Jesus.

I'm so grateful my heavenly Father gave me something different from what I deserved.

How are you expressing gratitude for the forgiveness you have received?

Notes:

Grieving with Hope

Jon D. Nutter

Our household recently went through the heart-wrenching death of our family dog, Drake. It was sudden and painful, and I still find it difficult to accept. It was my son's first taste of enduring loss. Death is difficult to deal with, even if the one who dies is a pet.

Drake's death opened up many conversations about grief and mourning, life and life after death. I'm not saying all dogs go to heaven. But in loss, I have reflected on how people of faith cope and hope in death, even the sudden, tragic, and senseless deaths of people we know and love.

No loss is easy. We grieve and mourn. But when it comes to brothers and sisters in Christ, Paul's words offer us clarity and encouragement about the future. The dead in Christ shall rise. We'll be together again. Our grief as Christians for Christians is one with hope!

At times of death, how has your hope in Christ brought you comfort?

Read

1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

We do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.

—1 Thessalonians 4:13

Notes:

The Promise Keeper

Priscilla Tate Gilmore

Read

1 Corinthians 15:24–28

Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.

—1 Corinthians 15:24

Satan and his forces actively look for opportunities to overwhelm believers with his taunts. Should we give in to his ridicules? No. As Christians, we know better. We must remember that we are children of our Lord and Savior. We should never lose sight of his promises in the Word of God; we know that they are true and that God is faithful. Let us hold on to the hope that one day soon Jesus will return to conquer every enemy of God.

God confirms his promises with the word *will*. Because we have a heavenly Father who is faithful and just to keep his promises, we should be encouraged that we have a future awaiting us where nothing and no one will be able to harm us.

Today let us come to the Lord Jesus Christ in prayer, cast all anxiety on him, and rejoice in his wonderful promises.

How can you trust and walk closely with the Promise Keeper?

Notes:

Trust God

Priscilla Tate Gilmore

Part of my job as a caregiver is to wash dishes, clean rooms, make beds, and transport clients to stores for groceries and prescriptions. Although I get to know the people and learn how to put others before myself, caregiving has its challenges. Many days I arrive home physically and emotionally drained, wondering if my labor is in vain. Did I have any impact for the Lord today?

When I learned that one client was transported to a care facility and another had died suddenly, the losses seemed overwhelming. I prayed for the Lord to give me his strength so I could perform my duties the next day. I was fearful that I would not be a good witness.

Let us remember that in whatever work we do, if we are doing our best, our labor is not in vain. God has everything under control and directs the outcome.

How is God at work in your work?

Read

1 Corinthians 15:50–58

Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

—1 Corinthians 15:58b

Notes:

Be Mindful

Priscilla Tate Gilmore

Read

1 Corinthians 15:1–8,
12–14, 20–23,
42–45

I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand.

—1 Corinthians 15:1b

Do you need to be reminded of things such as important phone numbers, when to pick the kids up from school, or a dinner date with a friend or loved one?

From the moment we set our feet on the floor in the morning until we rest our heads on the pillow at night, we move at a hurried pace. Eight or ten hours seem to speed by like a whirlwind. During our work or play we get so caught up with the demands of life that we forget the Lord's nearness. And we fail to praise and thank God for Jesus' sacrifice for us.

When we realize that we have gotten caught up with the frantic pace of things, let us take some time to remember what Jesus did for us on the cross. Let us come to the Lord in prayer, always mindful of his loving presence.

How can you consistently remember the power and grace of the gospel?

Notes:

Stand Firm

Priscilla Tate Gilmore

Have you ever been in a predicament where you had to make a quick decision? Maybe the outcome of the decision meant continued life or possible death. Yet regardless of the potential outcome, you chose to stand firm in your belief.

Mordecai was not the only one who chose to stand firm with his decision and remain faithful to God. Nehemiah, the governor of Jerusalem, didn't let his enemies have the upper hand when they tried to deter him from rebuilding the walls of the city. He prayed that God would strengthen him so he could finish the task. And Daniel decided to stand firm, refusing to stop praying to the Lord God. He emerged unharmed from the lions' den because of God's miraculous protection.

Each day, when faced with critical decisions, let us remain loyal and faithful to God. When Satan attacks with his taunts, may we stand firm.

How will you stand firm for God?

Read

Esther 3:1–6

All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honor to Haman.... But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor.

—Esther 3:2

Notes:

Read

Esther 3:7–11

“If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will give ten thousand talents of silver to the king’s administrators for the royal treasury.”

—Esther 3:9

Beware Evil Counsel

Marcia Hoehne

One of the most important moves leaders can make is to surround themselves with good advisors. Organizational leaders, whether in business, government, or some other group, are often generalists whose major responsibilities are to define the vision or mission and make decisions to further it. To accomplish this, they call on specialists with expertise in key areas; they ask for data that will inform the decisions and solicit opinions on the likely result of different courses of action.

Problems arise when counselors struggle with their own motives or character. It’s bad enough when advisors recommend poor choices in service of their own ulterior motives, but even worse when the advisee doesn’t recognize treachery and goes along with the evil proposal. Such was the case with Haman and Xerxes. The king took advice from a man consumed with his own importance, resulting in a decree to destroy an entire people.

How can you surround yourself with good advisors?

Notes:

Hate Harms Us

Marcia Hoehne

Mia couldn't wait for graduation awards night. Scholarships and prizes would be handed out, and Mia had her eye on many. The one she wanted most was the coveted All-Around Trophy, given to the senior who excelled in academics, sports, leadership, citizenship, and more. Privately, Mia was sure she deserved this highest honor.

Mia received more awards than she expected. She was thrilled to be called onstage four times, and was clutching several certificates and medals when it came time to announce the All-Around. But the name called wasn't hers. Even worse, the winner was the classmate she disliked the most. As everyone else cheered and clapped, Mia seethed, her own honors lying forgotten in her lap.

We may think that our jealousy and hatred hurt the other person, but they really hurt us. When we resent someone else's favorable position, we are unable to enjoy our own blessings.

How can you keep jealousy and resentment from spoiling your enjoyment of God's blessings?

Read

Esther 5:9–14

"All this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate."

—Esther 5:13

Notes:

Read

Esther 8:3–8, 16–17

“Write another decree in the king’s name in behalf of the Jews.”

—Esther 8:8a

A New Decree

Marcia Hoehne

Sometimes Christians tend to think that the Old Testament is more or less “canceled.” They realize it is still part of the Word of God. But, after all, we’re under grace now and not law, and didn’t the author of Hebrews write that Jesus mediated a better covenant based on better promises? The apostle Paul had to assure early Christians on this point, writing in his Letter to the Romans that our faith in Christ upholds, not repeals, the Law. Jesus himself said he didn’t come to abolish the Law, but fulfill it.

In Esther’s day, the decrees of a king couldn’t be revoked. But the king could write a new decree filled with better news while still upholding the old. King Xerxes allowed Esther and Mordecai to mediate, as God did with Jesus. The enemy may plot to kill us, but there is life in the King’s new decree.

What does God’s new decree through Jesus mean to you?

Notes:

Days of Celebration

Marcia Hoehne

What do you think of when you hear the terms “day off,” “special event,” and “celebration”? Do you think of fun, food, and relaxation, or perhaps a break from work? You probably take some measure of joy from such events, even if you’re more introverted or must do a lot of the preparation for them. But maybe you think some celebrations are nonessential or even frivolous. Maybe we should be working instead of partying. It’s not like festivities are necessary to life, right?

It’s refreshing and intriguing to realize that this isn’t God’s view. According to the Scriptures, God ordained a number of celebrations and special observances for Israel, such as the days of Purim. Esther and Mordecai sent letters of direction on behalf of the king to all the people, and they fully cooperated.

Celebrations are a necessary and God-given part of experiencing rest, expressing thanks, and offering worship.

What gift or blessing from God can you celebrate today?

Read

Esther 9:18–23, 29–32

Mordecai...sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Xerxes...to have them celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar.

—Esther 9:20–21

Notes:

Advancing the Welfare of Others

James C. Hendrix

Read
Esther 10:1–3

*Mordecai...
worked for the
good of his
people and spoke
up for the welfare
of all the Jews.*

—Esther 10:3

During World War II, a British soldier named Charles Joseph Coward played a vital role in saving the lives of hundreds of Jewish prisoners. Coward escaped captivity by the German Army dozens of times, but German soldiers eventually captured him and sent him to the Monowitz concentration camp near Auschwitz. As a prisoner of war, Coward risked his life by helping British soldiers smuggle food and medicine to Jewish inmates at Auschwitz. Through his brave and unselfish acts, Coward helped an estimated four hundred prisoners escape from the Auschwitz death camp.

In both good and difficult circumstances, God's hand is at work as he guides and protects his children. Just as Mordecai and Charles Coward showed courage and did what was right to aid other people, each day God gives us opportunities to share our time, talents, and other resources to impact the lives of others and advance their welfare.

How can you be as concerned about the welfare of others as you are of your own?

Notes:

Helping, Not Hurting

James C. Hendrix

Years ago, members of a church I attended called a young minister to serve as their pastor. Initially, the new pastor showed great leadership—he was a talented communicator, expressed a clear vision for the church, and connected well with the congregation. But soon his effectiveness began to collapse. He refused to listen to advice from other leaders, insisted on having complete control over the church's finances, and worked to destroy the reputation of anyone who questioned his authority. It finally became clear that the harm he had caused could not be repaired unless he left.

Arrogance and lust for power cause the downfall of many people. In today's passage, we read about Haman, a man consumed by a desire for power. We see what can happen to those who are self-serving and want to destroy others.

May God help us serve his people by showing love and walking humbly.

How can you help others rather than harm them?

Read

Esther 7

They impaled Haman on the pole he had set up for Mordecai. Then the king's fury subsided.

—Esther 7:10

Notes:

Wise Judgment

James C. Hendrix

Read

1 Kings 3:16–28

When all Israel heard the verdict the king had given, they held the king in awe, because they saw that he had wisdom from God.

—1 Kings 3:28a

Earlier in my life I worked as an elementary-school administrator. Among my responsibilities, I often met with children who had gotten into trouble.

One day I met with two seven-year-old boys who had been fighting on the playground. After talking with these students and listening to a few other children who had seen the fight, I decided on the boys' consequences. Although they objected when I first told them of my decision, later the boys said they felt it was fair and that they were ready to accept their consequences.

Whether it's a judge hearing a dispute between two people or a father listening to his teen son's request to use the family car, all of us need wisdom to make appropriate decisions. Wisdom comes from God, and it is available to all who ask for it. Today, seek God's wisdom for your life—and trust him to give it.

How can you use God's wisdom in today's world?

Notes:

Proclaiming Good News

James C. Hendrix

As a college student, I spent two summers working with a ministry group in Chicago. For three months, other students and I lived in an inner-city area and met people from the neighborhood. As we developed friendships with the residents, we learned that many of them had no consistent source of income, lived in run-down apartments, and believed they would never escape poverty. Members from our group tutored adults and children, worked with people to find jobs, and helped families locate better housing. During Bible studies held in a local community center, parents, homeless men and women, and others who attended often told us how much the good news from God's Word brought meaning and hope to their lives.

God calls us to be a light in a world where many people feel forgotten. God can use us to share his message of love and grace with those who feel hopeless.

How can you reach out to someone who feels unloved?

Read

Luke 4:14–21

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.”

—Luke 4:18a

Notes:

A Good Kind of Fear

Joe Gregory

Read
Leviticus 25:8–17

“Do not take advantage of each other, but fear your God. I am the LORD you God.”

—Leviticus 25:17

A crucial element in our relationship with God and others is to have a holy and reverent fear of the Lord—not a fear that keeps us *from* God, but one that draws us *to* God. This fear is a deep sense of awe, honor, and respect. It confesses the greatness, holiness, and wonder of our amazing Creator.

The fear of God brings a fear of sin (Prov 3:7; 8:13). If one has no fear of God, one has no fear of sin. A holy fear of God helps us live out the commandments of God. This is especially true in how we love and treat others. As Christians we must love our neighbors as ourselves (Matt 22:39), never seeking to harm or use them. Rather, out of acknowledging who God is, we walk in obedience to live a life of love, both for others and for Almighty God.

How can you live in the awareness of God’s greatness?

Notes:

Living Out the Mission

Joe Gregory

Because of God's love, lost humanity has been offered the amazing gift of salvation. All of us have gone astray to our own way (Isa 53:6), yet this gift is available to each of us to receive by faith (Eph 2:8). This is the good news, and God's plan is for all to hear it. God is on a mission to reclaim, redeem, and restore the hearts of those far from him.

For Christians, the good news has reached us and we belong to Jesus Christ. Now we have a mission to share God's love and the story of grace with the world—whether across the street or thousands of miles away (Matt 28:19). As God used people to share the gospel in the early church (Acts 13:47), so now God desires to send us out to be a light, proclaiming forgiveness and freedom from sin through Jesus Christ.

How can you fulfill God's mission?

Read

Isaiah 49:1–7

“I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”

—Isaiah 49:6b

Notes:

Living in Freedom

Joe Gregory

Read

Isaiah 61:1–7

The LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.

—Isaiah 61:1b

Sin is enslaving in every way! People often believe that a sinful lifestyle will bring fulfillment and happiness, but they soon discover that they have become slaves of sin (John 8:34). Sin brings darkness and brokenness into our lives. Many long to be free from its deadly grip.

Before we committed to following Christ we, too, were bound by the hard taskmaster of sin and longed for freedom. We were living in pain, darkness, and captivity. But then we heard the voice of Jesus and our hearts were won to him. Christ set us free (Gal 5:1). Our freedom came at a price—a price that only Jesus could pay (1 Cor 6:20).

May we be forever grateful for our freedom and live to offer gratitude and praise to Christ. Let us walk about in spiritual freedom, displaying the amazing work that God can do to set someone free.

How can you give thanks for your freedom?

Notes:

Holy Living

Joe Gregory

God is holy, and he calls us to be holy (1 Peter 1:16). Holy living is possible even in this present time and culture by the grace of God (Titus 2:12). Holiness is when our lives are not only set apart *from* sin, but also set apart *to* God.

The essence of holiness is love, both love for God and for others. Love for God will bring a hatred of sin, and out of this love we obey and serve the Lord with all of our hearts. Love will do no harm to people, but will seek to do only that which is good (Rom 13:10).

In living out our lives in holiness, we walk as Jesus did and reveal him to those around us. May the Holy Spirit sanctify us and fill us with power to live out God's holiness, bearing fruit that draws others to Jesus Christ.

How can holiness be seen in your life?

Read

Isaiah 62:5–12

*They will be called
the Holy People, the
Redeemed of the
LORD.*

—Isaiah 62:12a

Notes:

In Search of Justice

Belinda Elliott

Read

Isaiah 61:8–11;

62:2–4a

*“For I, the LORD,
love justice; I
hate robbery and
wrongdoing.”*

—Isaiah 61:8a

Paul had managed the same team for fifteen years, but he'd never experienced problems such as the ones he was experiencing now. A member of his team had accused him of wrongdoing, and it seemed that company leaders were not on his side. Despite all the evidence he offered to counter his direct report's story, he was reprimanded by human resources and encouraged to take corrective actions. It was hugely unfair, but Paul conceded. He also began trying to rebuild the work relationship with his team member.

Sometimes we forget that even Christians will experience injustice in life. But we know that in our eternal home things will be different. Christ has already defeated evil. We may not experience justice in every situation now, but we serve a God who promises to set things right. Until then, he asks us to respond to others with grace—even when treated unfairly.

What injustice is God calling you to forgive?

Notes:

All Is Not Lost

Belinda Elliott

As Kelly sat down in her new condo and looked around, she felt a sense of relief wash over her. Only a few months had passed since her home burned down. It was the home where she had lived most of her adult life—the home where she had raised her children. She was thankful that no one was hurt, but she couldn't help feeling that she had lost everything. Even all the pictures of her family growing up were now gone.

As time went on, Kelly began to realize that all was not lost. She still had her family. With their help, and the help of her church family, she was rebuilding her life. Things would never be the same as they once had been, but she had seen that God was faithful to provide for her. He had lovingly protected her and restored her hope and peace.

What are you trusting God to restore?

Read

Deuteronomy 30:1–6

Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back.

—Deuteronomy 30:4

Notes:

A Floundering Sheep

Belinda Elliott

Read

Ezekiel 34:11–16

“This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.”

—Ezekiel 34:11

Pastor Mark took his responsibility to care for his church flock very seriously. In over two decades as a minister, he had been by people’s sides for weddings, funerals, baptisms, hospital stays, court hearings, promotions, and layoffs. Most of them welcomed his encouragement, but lately he’d had trouble connecting with one particular congregant.

Bob was once an active member, but recently he seemed distant. Mark heard from others that Bob had become involved in some questionable behaviors. And Bob repeatedly brushed off Mark’s many attempts to chat.

Initially, these rejections from Bob left Mark feeling like a failure. How could he minister to someone who was set on ignoring him? That’s when God reminded Mark that though he was tasked with caring for God’s flock, God was the true Shepherd. Sometimes the sheep would go astray, but Mark’s role was to continue loving them as God led them back.

How can you extend godly love to those who resist it?

Notes:

Strength that Endures

Belinda Elliott

Jennifer had a difficult winter. Fighting off disease had consumed her energy and left her tired. Her husband and children were a huge support, but the tests and treatments were exhausting. Yet through it all, she was amazed at the peace she experienced. The difficulties pushed her to trust the Lord more deeply than ever before. Regardless of how she felt physically, she rested in the knowledge that God was in control of the situation.

Jennifer was ecstatic when her doctor shared that her treatments appeared to be working. God had seen her through the worst of the storm! Though she knew there were still more treatments to go through, she also knew that God could strengthen her body the same way he had strengthened her spirit during her time of trouble. She would rely on him for the help she would need to face whatever the future held.

How has God strengthened you in difficult times?

Read

Zechariah 10:6–12

“I will strengthen them in the LORD and in his name they will live securely.”

—Zechariah 10:12

Notes:

Eager to Forgive

Janice Davies

Read
Acts 5:27–32

“God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins.”

—Acts 5:31

Much of what people say and do today is made public online. When an individual or group has an opposing view, they are often quick to find fault and demand an apology. Many times their motive is political or to gain publicity. Even if the person being criticized does apologize, the opponents discuss whether the apology was sincere or went far enough. While sometimes an apology is needed, our culture seems very quick to blame and slow to forgive.

God doesn't need the Internet to know all we say and do. He knows every sin, every act of disobedience, and every time we have grieved him. God asks us to repent, and his only motive is love. Our sin separates us from him, yet he wants a relationship with us.

The songwriter called God's undeserved kindness “Amazing Grace.” When we run to our heavenly Father, he is eager to forgive.

How do you need God's forgiveness today?

Notes:
