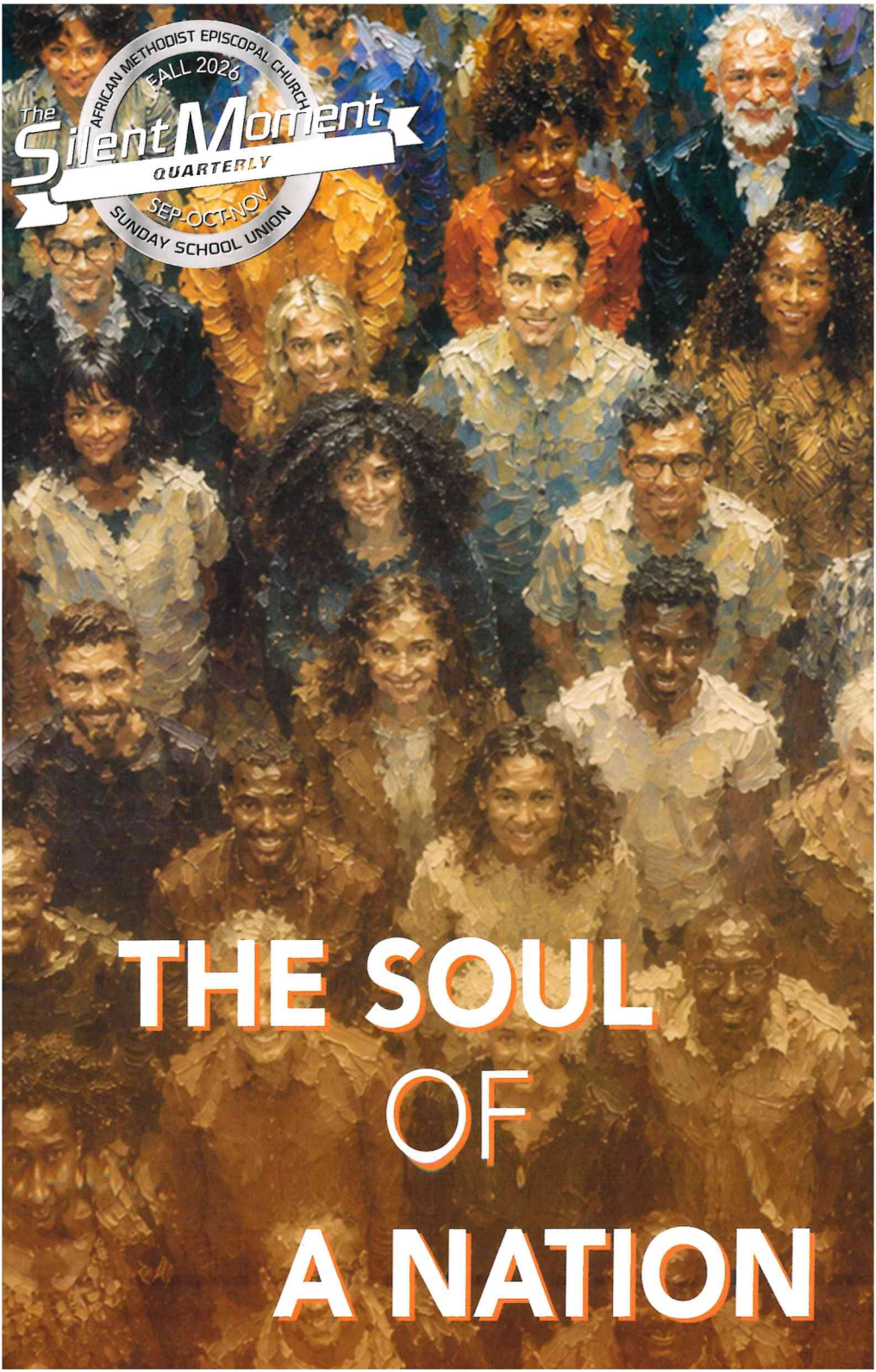
AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH
FALL 2026
The Silent Moment
QUARTERLY
SEP-OCT-NOV
SUNDAY SCHOOL UNION
THE SOUL
OF
A NATION

THE SILENT MOMENT

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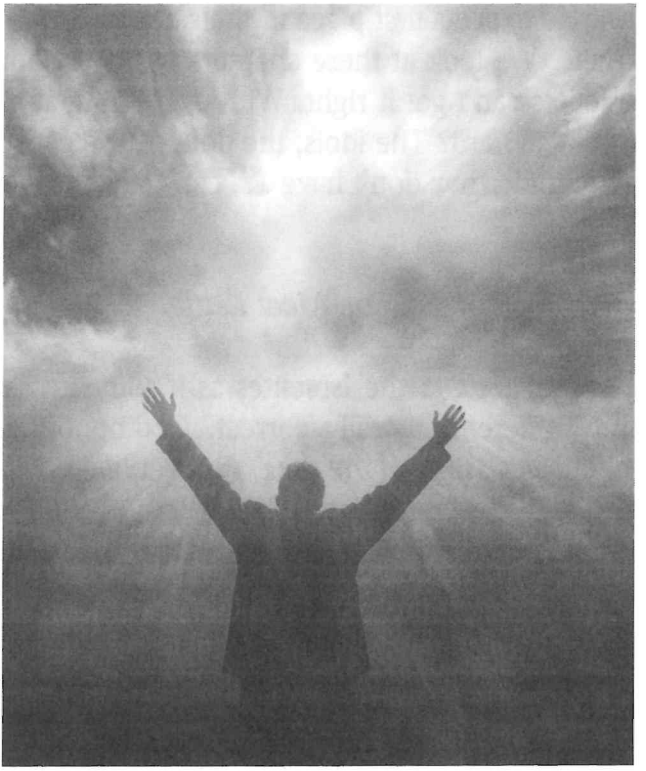
The Silent Moment

Again the Israelites cried out to the Lord, and he gave them a deliverer.

—— Judges 3:15



September-November 2026

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Generations: From Canaan to Jerusalem

The title of this quarter almost lends itself to a *Netflix* series—the Israelites sure give us plenty to talk about. We look at their story and mentally scream from thousands of years away, *"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!"* The Creator of the universe chooses them to be His set-apart people. He promises a sacred relationship with Him, a land flowing with milk and honey, protection against their enemies, and His provision for everything they could ever need, want, or ask for. In return, He expects first place in their hearts.

Simple, right? We look at these chapters in history and wonder why the Israelites can't get it right. With everything at stake, why do they make it so hard? The idols, the doubts, the egos, the longing for the one thing they don't have . . . can they not see that God has a plan?

Hello, Pot. Meet Kettle.

It's tempting to look at the Israelites as if somehow we would make entirely different, morally correct, God-honoring, respectable, perfect choices 100% of the time. And yet, we don't—at least I don't. Not today, not yesterday, and not tomorrow. I trip up on the same things as the Israelites. I don't always trust that God has it under control. I get scared that He's forgotten me. I think that maybe I should just do things my way to be sure they get done on my timetable. I decide that sometimes there's a better way than what I know to be His. Just this once, at least. How about you?

My prayer is that these Scriptures and daily devotions remind you of two vitally important truths: 1) God will never give up on

you; and 2) His plan to deliver and redeem you is flawless—and complete. Over and over (and over), the Israelites fail. But when they call out to God, He is always there. This is true for us as well. We are never so far gone that He won't hear us and come running. In fact, He's already there. His plan to save us has been in place since the beginning of time, and all we have to do is cry out to Him.

Will we struggle? Yep. Will we wander away? For sure. Will we doubt and panic and do stupid things out of fear? Absolutely. Will God always be there? Will He still demand first place? Will He lead us back and let us try again when we fall short? Undoubtedly and forever. So, let's give the Israelites a break and learn to see ourselves in their story. The meantime is a little messy, but our promised land is heaven, and our victory song was written on the cross.

May His mercy, grace, and peace be yours.
Karen

Approach Each Day With a Heavenly Perspective

Using these devotions, you'll read the recommended text of the Bible, consider how its message applies to your life, then use the brief prayer to begin a conversation with God.

If you follow the ISSL Series, you'll likely notice that these devotions align with the ISSL Home Daily Bible Readings. Every day you pick up this devotional, countless people around the world are reading and studying the same verses as you. Opening the Bible each day invites us to a deeper fellowship with Christ as we apply God's Word to our lives.

See What God Has Promised

So Abram went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he pitched his tents. There he built an altar to the LORD (Genesis 13:18).

Scripture: Genesis 13:14–18
Song: "Standing on the Promises"

Promises are at the center of public life and everyday experience. Politicians offer promises to convince voters to support them. Most of us regularly sign contracts binding companies to deliver what they've promised, and we make a promise when we initiate a lease or take out a mortgage. Lawyers build careers, and court dockets are filled with disputes over promises made and broken.

But no one is suing God for breach of contract. The Scripture record as well as history confirm that God kept the promise in today's passage. Seeing that gives us confidence to believe He will keep the myriads of promises sprinkled throughout the Bible. Reading one of them after another gives us courage to face life another day.

We may find it difficult to believe some of God's promises. When that happens, we can imagine how Abram felt when he heard the words we're reading today. God was prophesying something that seemed impossible to Abram. We do well to remember him when we doubt whether God's promises can come true in our lives too.

Father, thank You for Your faithfulness to deliver on all You've promised. Encourage me as I choose to believe what You've told me is true. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

The Promised Land Revealed

Then the LORD said to him, "This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when I said, 'I will give it to your descendants.' I have let you see it with your eyes" (Deuteronomy 34:4).

Scripture: Deuteronomy 34:1–12
Song: "Great Is Thy Faithfulness"

When I think of promises made to me, two categories stand out. One is the set of promises my wife made when she married me. She stuck with me "for better, for worse, in sickness and in health." Despite tough times and disappointments, hospital trips and sick bed vigils, she stood beside me. A close second are the promises made by employers and the government to pay me what they said they would. Long before payday, I could count on what I would receive. And when it came time to claim the promise made to me for decades by the government, my Social Security checks arrived on schedule month after month after month.

When God showed Moses the promised land, He was proving how He would keep the promise made to Abraham and his heirs centuries earlier. Imagine what Moses must have been thinking when all he could see before him would soon belong to his people. God keeps His promises!

The biblical record convinces us that God will ever be faithful. "Be content with what you have," the Hebrews writer advises, "because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you'" (Hebrews 13:5).

Father, thank You for all the signs I see that You are keeping Your promises to me. Be with me today. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

God's Promised Rest

Anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his (Hebrews 4:10).

Scripture: Hebrews 4:1–10
Song: "There Is a Balm in Gilead"

When I came down with COVID-19, I had no choice: I had to rest, and this was good. Of course, I did not enjoy the runny nose and aggravating cough. For a couple of days, I had the worst sore throat I've ever experienced. I cancelled my haircut and skipped my weekly Bible study. I didn't visit my wife living in a memory care center. I stayed in bed in the mornings and curled up under a blanket in the afternoons. I shamelessly watched hours of TV; I had no energy for anything more. I was very tired, and so I rested. After five days of isolation, I was ready to get back into the world, but I'll admit I enjoyed all the time I'd had with no obligation besides taking care of myself.

But too often we feel guilty or lazy when we rest. People are counting on us. Our long list of goals and duties contains many items not yet handled.

We do well to remember God ordained rest. Who could be more powerful than God? Who could accomplish more? But He rested, which means taking a break is holy obedience, not selfish indulgence. Sometimes a nap may be the most God-honoring pastime we could pursue!

Father, thank You for giving the command and setting the example for us to rest. Help me to feel Your presence close the next time I take a break. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

God's New Covenant

For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy (Hebrews 10:14).

Scripture: Hebrews 10:14–18
Song: "Jesus Paid It All"

When someone close to me made an appointment to visit, I was pretty sure I knew what he wanted. But when he arrived and asked me to forgive him "for everything," I melted. In just a moment, years of resentment were washed away with my tears. But then he wanted to know what he should do next. He said he owed me restitution, although that thought had not occurred to me. Over the next year he sent me thousands of dollars to repay me for bills he decided he should have covered. Today I wonder if he felt he needed to earn my forgiveness.

And I wonder how many of us feel the same way about God. Do we feel a need to sacrifice to God, work for God, or tell others about God—all to be "good enough" for the forgiveness we know we need from Him? If so, today's Scripture is a good reminder. The only necessary sacrifice has already been offered. Jesus paid the price we owe.

Gratitude for forgiveness received will always spur deeper devotion than fear of forgiveness unearned. Breathing freely the sweet oxygen of God's grace, we worship and obey Him not to earn His forgiveness but to thank Him for it.

Father, thank You for providing the ultimate sacrifice to take the punishment I deserve. Help me remember it will always be enough and that You couldn't love me more than You already do. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Whom Shall I Fear?

Hear my voice when I call, LORD; be merciful to me and answer me (Psalm 27:7).

Scripture: Psalm 27
Song: "I Need Thee Every Hour"

My wife is afraid of spiders and snakes, but my fear is vermin. I hate to admit it, but once when we found a mouse in the garage, my wife called me later at work to tell me she had caught it. I don't even like to see squirrels scurrying along the fence in my backyard. They remind me of rats. And when I thought I heard mice in the attic above my bedroom, I couldn't sleep. With long breaths punctuating my prayer, I repeated a phrase adapted from Psalm 3:5, 6: "I will . . . not fear . . . for God . . . is with me."

But the issues the psalmist confronts in today's passage are much bigger than household pests. He's facing an army of enemies. Maybe even his parents are against him. And he knows his only strength will come from God.

Whatever our fear, there's much to help us in today's psalm. Not only will God be with us, but He can lift us above the thing we fear. We can live holier, more obedient lives, as we turn to God in the face of our oppression. And in the shadows of the night, we can cope with our fears by breathing deeply and repeating these words: "Hear my . . . voice when . . . I call, Lord."

Father, help me to see how You are protecting me today from the consequences of what I fear most. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Be Strong and Courageous

Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go (Joshua 1:9).

Scripture: Joshua 1:1–11
Song: "Same God"

Do a Google search for "locker room pep talk," and you'll find dozens of them, almost all sharing common attributes. They're energetic. They remind the team of what they've accomplished, all they've learned in practice, and how they've overcome other excellent teams. They challenge players to depend on their teammates and to find in themselves the strength to win.

Today's Scripture is a pep talk of another kind, directly from God, and it's not at all about depending on yourself or any other person. Here God tells Joshua, again and again, to be strong and courageous—not because of his people or himself, but because God's strong arm will support him, and God's sure Word will direct him. Joshua does not need athletic prowess but humble obedience to accomplish the daunting tasks God has set before him. God will be the source of his victory.

That same God is available today for every believer. When we study God's Word and embrace His will, we can obey with confidence that He will not fail us. God can be just as present with us as He was with Joshua. When you're as committed to His purposes as Joshua was, "The Lord your God will be with you."

Father, give me grace to rely on You instead of myself and to seek and see the strength You've promised to those who depend on You. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Hold Fast to the Teachings

So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

Scripture: 2 Thessalonians 2:13–17
Song: "Basics of Life"

Whether it's working on a church day when I don't *have* to, being too insecure to speak up when I should, or simply skipping daily Bible reading because I'm too tired, there are countless times I've been tempted to hide my beliefs or "ease up" on my spiritual practices. And Christians of old likely faced similar temptations.

It's easy for doctrine to become a religion without feeling. But the guidelines Jesus gave Paul were intended to fuel our faith while keeping us steady. When society's morals shift, instead of questioning our own stances, these beliefs of right and wrong guide us back to the straight and narrow path Jesus knew few would choose.

The world is always going to want us to compromise and bend "the rules" to make life more convenient. But Christianity isn't about convenience. We are called to be set apart, just as Israel was expected to act differently than all other nations. We are called to hold fast, unchanging, to God's never-changing Word.

Father, keep me constant and faithful when I am tempted to give in to the world's ideals. Guide me today and always in Your truth. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Victory at the Sea

And when the Israelites saw the mighty hand of the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant (Exodus 14:31).

Scripture: Exodus 14:21–31
Song: "I'm Gonna See a Victory"

While in college, I lived independently and spent my days working and my evenings writing papers. Sometimes bills were breathing down my neck that I honestly didn't think I could pay on time. I'd work hard, manage my time and finances diligently, and pray fervently. Then, a random refund would appear on my account, and everything would work out. God always provided.

Old Testament stories aren't just metaphors. Although our "battles" are less physical than in the days of Exodus, they are no less stressful. Let's claim the promise that no weapon held against us is stronger than the God we serve. Let's trust Him to give us victory. Our minds wage an unseen war, but God is still God!

The Lord wants to demonstrate His capability, like parting a sea for His people to evade the enemy or showing He cares about our simplest problems just to bolster our faith. No issue is too small or great for God.

Father, help me trust that You can use my life as a demonstration of Your power. Give me victory over all temptations, mental struggles, and health concerns. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

The Lord Goes Before Us

And the cloud of the LORD was upon them by day when they set out from the camp (Numbers 10:34).

Scripture: Numbers 10:29–36
Song: "Sometimes by Step"

I heard a crash from upstairs and froze outside the front door. None of my roommates was home, and the house was completely dark with the light switch out of reach. With a healthy dose of fear, I returned to my car. When the police arrived, they took the situation seriously, calmly inspecting the home to ensure every square foot was safe. How silly I felt when all they found were shampoo bottles on the bottom of the bathtub! But they assured me they were glad I called instead of taking the risk.

Similarly, we may be tempted to trust our own instincts, not wanting to "bother" the Lord—until we find ourselves in a crisis or a crossroads, when we start asking why He's abandoned us. Sometimes we just need to call on Jesus to reveal our next move.

The Lord has gone before us; He is aware of our surroundings, our futures, our every step. Even when the situation seems grim or we don't actually feel Him, if we have committed our lives to following Him, we can guarantee He really is leading us. He's the safe haven we run to and the pillar of fire we (figuratively) pursue.

Father, remind me that You are guiding me. Reveal Your presence in every situation. Keep me in the path You've chosen for my life. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Do Not Be Afraid

But he said to them, "It is I; don't be afraid" (John 6:20).

Scripture: John 6:15–21
Song: "No Longer Slaves"

The idea of solo travel as a female was exhilarating. But as I boarded my flight to Morocco, the jitters settled in. Then, a native Moroccan couple sat next to me, shared their sandwiches, and talked excitedly about their country. Turns out, the husband was a highly respected former soccer player. Not only did they tell me to follow them through security, but they also offered me a ride to my hotel. Of course, I hesitated. But after watching their character, how others treated them, and knowing their daughter and grandson were picking them up, I felt peace.

The media encourages wariness of strangers and panic in response to just about everything else. Anxiety is at an all-time high. While it's important to use discretion, Jesus never promoted distrust. Instead, in some of the most absurd situations, He told His disciples not to be afraid.

As God's children, we don't have to live in darkness. The enemy has no true power except sending mental messages of hate and fear. We can choose to listen to Jesus' words of comfort and faith to overcome these lies. There's a trove of blessings awaiting us on the other side of that boundary.

Father, I surrender all my fears to You. Let Your perfect love and steadfast peace consume my heart and mind. Help me push all fearful thoughts aside to hear Your voice of reason clearly. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Remember God's Mighty Deeds

"I will consider all your works and meditate on all your mighty deeds" (Psalm 77:12).

Scripture: Psalm 77:11–20
Song: "Desert Song"

My husband and I were elated. I'd just shown him the positive pregnancy test—we were going to be parents! Just a few hours later, trepidation set in. How were we going to provide for our child? My husband was still in college, currently at an internship; I was working full-time but knew I didn't want to work once the baby arrived. We committed these concerns to Jesus and began a fervent job search. A few months before our son was born, my husband landed a full-time position he was not qualified for, making more than he expected.

Human nature causes us to overthink. As the saying goes, "We plan, God laughs." Truly, He has our best interests in mind! Whether we see Him working or not, we can know He will see us through, and we can praise Him in the meantime.

Take a moment to reflect on your life. Maybe you were steeped in sin, at the end of hope, when Jesus stepped in. Maybe you couldn't make ends meet but had a sudden breakthrough; maybe a supposed stroke of bad luck turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Let's give God the tribute He deserves for the deeds He has done—and those He has yet to do!

Father, You provide for me time and time again. Thank You for all You have done and all You are working behind the scenes to do. I will continue to profess and testify of Your works in my life. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Remember Jesus' Saving Work

"This is my body, which is for you; this do in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:24).

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 11:23–27
Song: "He Paid It All"

At age 13, I committed my life to God while attending a church youth camp. The night before camp, I was sicker than I've ever been. Yet, when the 4 a.m. alarm sounded, I dragged my depleted body downstairs. Two days into camp, my foot began to ache terribly. My ankle was so swollen that my sandal strap had disappeared. The camp doctor theorized I was bitten by a brown recluse spider. Given our remote location, not much could be done. When the final evening service wrapped up with an invitation to anyone wanting to give their heart to Jesus and be baptized, I hobbled forward. I wasn't going to let the enemy deter me.

Just as Jesus knew the tests that awaited Him, we all will face tests of faith. But without a test, there is no testimony. Just as Jesus could offer salvation after relinquishing His life before conquering death, so we can testify of the grace given us through His sacrifice.

Perhaps you have a defining moment when you decided to follow Christ, despite whatever hurdles the enemy threw at you. Reflect on that day and the work Jesus did to get you to that life-changing moment. And if you have not yet made that decision, open your heart to the work that Jesus wants to do in you. Don't let the enemy deter you either.

Father, thank You for Your ultimate sacrifice. Whenever life feels unfair or difficult, point me back to Calvary and remind me Jesus did not die in vain. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Crossing Into the Promised Land

"When your descendants ask their parents, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them, 'Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground'" (Joshua 4:21-22).

Scripture: Joshua 4:14–24
Song: "As for Me and My House"

I sighed in relief. I'd graduated and secured a job in the same week! Albeit, my degree and the career weren't in the same field, but it didn't matter. All my hard work was done, right? Well, I still had to prove myself. There was training to survive, new skills to hone, boundaries to navigate, managers to please, and promotions to earn.

Sometimes we think obeying God will immediately make our lives happy and free of worry, the hard times behind us. Maybe the Israelites felt that way when they finally crossed over the Jordan River, but their battles had just begun. Yes, it was tremendous that God brought them safe and dry to the promised land! However, it wasn't long before they needed to strategize and learn to fight for every inch of land the Lord had marked for them.

While believing in Christ assures our eternal destination, it does not instantly alleviate all of life's burdens. In fact (spoiler alert) being a Christian actually places us directly in the enemy's crosshairs. Freedom in Christ comes with true reprieve. But some days we have to reclaim our peace and joy from the enemy's grasp and rest in what is rightfully ours.

Father, You never promised smooth sailing, but You did pledge to always be with me. Help me face today knowing You already won the war, and the battles I face make me more like You. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Live as God's Holy People

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession (Deuteronomy 7:6).

Scripture: Deuteronomy 7:1–11
Song: "Chosen"

One of my childhood hobbies was collecting baseball cards. Now, many years removed from being a kid, I still have many of those cards. I have several old cards that are of some value—a 1964 Sandy Koufax card and a 1973 Hank Aaron card, for example. My most treasured one though is a 1956 Jackie Robinson card. It's my treasured possession.

The condition of that card is good enough that it would be worth a little money, but that's not why I value it. I value it because of who Jackie Robinson was and what he did for baseball. The value of treasured possessions is not measured in dollars and cents.

God's people are His treasured possession. He gave the Israelites a promised land and victory over their enemies. What motivated God to do this was His incredible love for His people. And He still provides, loves, and cares for us today. God wants us to know how valuable we are to Him and to live like it. Let's put Him first and trust Him. Know that He is God, and we are His people. Nothing can be better than that.

Father, as I go throughout this day, may I remember who I am in Your eyes. May I serve You well, always. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

God Will Love and Bless

"For the LORD your God, who is among you, is a great and awesome God" (Deuteronomy 7:21).

Scripture: Deuteronomy 7:12–26
Song: "How Great Is Our God"

At a recent Bible study, we were discussing God's love for His people. A friend shared a story about how God provided for him and his family. He'd decided to run his business in a godly manner. Doing so caused him to miss some opportunities, and he was losing money. He and his wife prayed. They wanted to serve the Lord in their business, but they were going under. Not long after that prayer time, the man picked up three new opportunities that he'd never had before or seen coming.

Today's passage reminds us that God is at work on behalf of His people. If they honor and obey Him, He will bless them. He can multiply little to make it more than enough.

In the same way, God loves us and wants to work in our lives. There are many things that threaten and challenge us. Life can be both hard and scary. In those dark and difficult moments, we can turn to the Lord and know He will stand with us. He will give us what we need to meet the moment. Fear, worry, and stress melt away in the presence of God's greatness. Nothing this world hurls at us is too hard for the Lord.

Father, thank You for loving me and providing what I need just when I need it. Help me today to trust You even more. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Strengthened in Every Circumstance

"I can do all this through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13).

Scripture: Philippians 4:10–19
Song: "You Are My All in All"

A spring storm in our area knocked out the power for several city blocks, including the house of our friends. They weren't worried, though. They had flashlights. All would be just fine, or so they thought. They got the flashlights out and clicked the buttons, but nothing happened. The batteries were dead. Sitting in darkness, they had to wait until power was restored to have light in their home.

A flashlight without a good battery is useless in a storm. It's the battery that gives the flashlight power. Paul wanted his readers—in ancient Philippi and today—to know who gave him power.

Paul's power came from knowing Jesus. Just as He strengthened Paul, Jesus strengthens us too. Whether in the ordinary day-to-day activities or the challenges when our resources are not enough, Jesus is there. He's not going to abandon us or leave us to fend for ourselves. He will give us what we need when we need it. Paul's contentment came from deep confidence and trust that the Lord was with him. God met Paul's needs, and He will meet ours too.

Father, I thank You for Jesus. May I turn to Him today to get what I need for what is before me. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Armed for Spiritual Warfare

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does (2 Corinthians 10:3).

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 10:1–5, 15–18
Song: "The Lion and the Lamb"

"How you play the game matters." I first heard this statement from a high school baseball coach. His point was clear. He was interested in whether we were practicing things the right way. Were we disciplining ourselves to play the game correctly whether hitting, fielding ground balls, or hitting the cutoff man?

Doing things right is important. Paul makes it clear to his readers that they are engaged in spiritual warfare, but not like the world fights. The weapons used in this conflict are different and so is the battlefield. This battle is in the hearts and minds of people.

We are engaged in that same battle today. The world offers so many thoughts and ideas that go against what the Bible says. At times it can seem overwhelming. But we don't have to be discouraged. The Lord has equipped us, and we stand on the truth of God's Word. Looking through the lens of God's truth gives us a powerful weapon. No matter what, the battle belongs to the Lord.

Father, thank You for being with me in the struggles and battles of this life. Help me to use the weapons of Your Word and truth in my daily life. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Christ Has Overcome the World

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Scripture: John 16:23–33
Song: "All Hail King Jesus"

This spring has been a season of storms, and not long ago one rolled through central Missouri and left quite a bit of damage in its wake. In a town not far from where I live, buildings were blown down, houses were destroyed, and life was turned upside down. The damage was widespread. Storms can cause a lot of trouble.

You don't have to live in Missouri to know about storms. Most of us know what it's like to have trouble in this world. From physical storms to the heartaches and heartbreaks of this life, we don't have to go far to find trouble.

It's important to remember that when trouble finds us, there's hope. Jesus reassures His disciples that despite the chaos the world may throw at them, they can have peace. Jesus wants them (and us) to know the good news: He has overcome the world. Whether we face uncertainty and loneliness as the disciples did after Jesus' ascension or we deal with the problems and hassles that this life brings, we can be confident that Jesus knows, understands, and will get us through.

Father, thank You for the peace You offer in the middle of our trouble. Help me today to know Your peace and to live in the victory You have won. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

God Fights for God's People

So Joshua subdued the whole region, including the hill country, the Negev, the western foothills and the mountain slopes, together with all their kings. He left no survivors (Joshua 10:40).

Scripture: Joshua 10:40–11:5
Song: "The Battle Belongs to the Lord"

It was a bad day. A friend of mine received word that her mother's cancer had returned. Then she and her husband found out they had some additional tax payments to make that they had not anticipated. Those were just the first two of a series of hard things that arose on one day. It seemed like they were being pummeled on every side.

There are days like that. The enemy seems to launch an attack, and we feel under constant bombardment. Joshua's story provides a word of hope. The nation of Israel faced some tough foes as they entered the promised land. Those enemies had huge armies, but the victory was not theirs. Why? God fights for His people.

And He still fights for us today. There are times when we have days like my friend had. Things can get really challenging. We feel like we have nowhere to go, no one who cares. On those days, remember God is with you. He fights for you. Before they entered the promised land, God reassured His children, "I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run" (Exodus 23:27). When the battle is hard, know that you do not fight alone.

Father, thank You for being with me. Today may I rely on You to get me through. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

God Brings Victory

The Lord said to Joshua, "Do not be afraid of them, because by this time tomorrow I will hand all of them, slain, over to Israel" (Joshua 11:6).

Scripture: Joshua 11:6–9, 16–23
Song: "Victory in Jesus"

As a baseball fan, I've heard a lot of discussions about who the best players are at any given position. I ran across an interesting conversation. The question was, "If you had a game that you had to win or else, do or die, what pitcher would you choose to pitch?" The answer that made the most sense was Cardinals pitcher Bob Gibson. He was intense and determined to win. His 1968 season is regarded as one of the best—if not *the* best—ever. If you had to have a win on a sunny afternoon, you'd do well to give the ball to Bob Gibson. As rock-solid a choice as Gibson is, there is one even more reliable to bring the victory. Who? God.

The people of Israel faced powerful armies greater than them. The Lord, though, made it clear that He would bring victory to His people. He still does.

There are all kinds of things that threaten us today. We may feel like there's no way to win. Losing seems inevitable, and we are bone tired. During these times may we turn to the Lord. The words "Do not be afraid" resonate with us. If God is for us, why should we fear?

Father, thank You for being with me and bringing victory in my life. May I trust You for today's battles. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Welcoming Strangers

So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab (Joshua 2:1).

Scripture: Joshua 2:1–7
Song: "Rahab's Lullaby"

During World War II, Johanna Eck faced a moral choice: save herself or others. Risking imprisonment or death, she sheltered the son of deported Jewish friends. After an air raid destroyed her home, she found another safe haven for him. He survived the Holocaust. Eck moved to a tiny one-room apartment but willingly shared it—and her meager rations—with a Jewish girl who escaped a Gestapo raid. While fear of Nazis deterred many from helping, Eck courageously offered hospitality.

Rahab too chooses the righteous path and opens her home to strangers. The king never asks Rahab whether she's hidden the spies who threaten her country, so he must have known she'd welcomed them in. In his eyes, she's guilty, and he demands that she bring them out. To defy the king's request would certainly mean death. Yet Rahab doesn't fear an earthly king. Her faith in the King of kings guides her words and actions.

We may never have to risk our lives to protect others. But each day as we seek to share the good news of Christ, we may have to conquer fear to stand up for what's right, speak out against injustice, or simply welcome strangers.

Father, help me choose the path of righteousness, regardless of the risk. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Faith Without Works Is Dead

I will show you my faith by my deeds (James 2:18).

Scripture: James 2:14–26
Song: "Sent Forth by God's Blessing"

On transplant day, Rick and Pete carpooled to the hospital. They had been close friends for decades as their families grew up in church. Although Rick had decided to be an organ donor years before, he had never considered being a living donor until Pete could no longer survive without a new kidney. So on February 16, 2018, they arrived at the hospital together, where Rick gave a kidney to his friend.

Out of the depth of his love, Rick took action. According to James, action is an integral part of a relationship with God. He makes this clear through the example of Abraham, whose lifelong faith was so strong that he was willing to sacrifice his son out of obedience to God. But good deeds aren't limited to masters of faith. Rahab was a new believer known for her sin. Yet she was so awed by the stories of God that, by faith, she risked her life to save the spies.

James wants us to know that faith and action work together. When we are generous, care for the brokenhearted, or glorify God through our spiritual gifts, we show our love for God, and our faith comes alive.

Father, I know that I am saved by faith and not my works. But today, may my actions demonstrate my love for You. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

May the Nations Know God's Salvation

May God . . . make his face shine on us (Psalm 67:1).

Scripture: Psalm 67
Song: "The Blessing"

A photograph captures a moment in time, an emotion, a memory. One photo that I treasure shows my son with his great grandmother. At 10, he's already taller and drapes his arm around her shoulders. They look at each other like best friends, big grins verging on laughter. Grandma was known for her blue eyes that twinkled with joy. The photo captures those eyes, filled with love for her grandson, and they light up her face.

God looks at us in much the same way, with eyes so full of love that His face shines upon us. Those who adore us want the best for us, and the psalmist asks the same of God: "Be gracious to us and bless us" (v. 1). But the motivation for God's blessing, the psalmist says, is our praise. The abundance of God should result in abundant praise so that everyone on earth knows God and joins in praising Him for His salvation, guidance, and justice.

Praise comes easily with life's blessings. We want to shout from the rooftops so that everyone hears of God's goodness. But even in hard times when we struggle financially or people disappoint us, we can remember that God looks at us with a love so great that He sent His Son to save us! In all situations, we can shout our praise so others may know His salvation.

Father, thank You for sending Your Son to save me. May my praise of thanksgiving bring others to salvation. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Faith to Live By

Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see (Hebrews 11:1).

Scripture: Hebrews 11:1–2, 29–31
Song: "By Faith"

The most famous bobsledding team in Winter Olympics captured the hearts of fans worldwide. Not because they won gold. The men crashed and had to push their sled across the finish line, disqualifying them. The team hailed from the tropics of Jamaica, saw their first bobsled six months before the games, and competed in borrowed equipment. Yet they top the bobsledders' Who's Who list because they faced the odds with optimistic faith and hard work.

Another unlikely addition to a Who's Who list is Rahab. She didn't build an ark like Noah, offer her son as a sacrifice like Abraham, or lead her people through the Red Sea like Moses. Yet she's included among these heroes of faith. Why? She heard stories of God's greatness and believed with faith so strong she risked her life. Her certainty of unseen things and her surety that God would save her reflect the definition of faith.

Rahab's name is the only one that includes a descriptor—*prostitute*—which seems to increase the unlikelihood of her presence on the list. But it also shows us that a sinful past doesn't limit our future faith. God's grace can redeem anyone to lead a faith-filled life.

Father, like Rahab, I am a sinner redeemed by grace. And like her, may I be known for my faith through my actions. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

God Shows No Partiality

"God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right" (Acts 10:34–35).

Scripture: Acts 10:34–48
Song: "In Christ There Is No East or West"

An unusual group gathers in Birmingham, Alabama, on Sunday mornings. We come from all walks of life—blue-collar and white-collar workers, residents of a women's addiction recovery center, individuals experiencing homelessness, former prisoners, close and shattered families. We are economically and racially diverse. But we are all equally and warmly welcomed as we join to worship.

The Bible makes it clear that God shows no favoritism. In this first recorded gospel presentation to non-Jews, Peter realizes that all who "fear God and do what is right" receive forgiveness of sins when they believe in Jesus (Hebrews 10:35, 43). While Peter speaks, the gathered Gentiles receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, undeniable evidence that God welcomes all.

Peter's speech has much to teach us. For anyone earnestly seeking God, it's encouraging to know that we can cry out to Him and He will respond without regarding our nationality, past, position, or possessions. For those who already believe in Jesus, this passage reminds us to accept others and, without judging them, present the gospel to all who will hear.

Father, help me throw open the doors of my church and my heart to anyone who seeks You. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Rahab's Faith in God

"The LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below" (Joshua 2:11).

Scripture: Joshua 2:8–14
Song: "I Believe"

In 1781 astronomer William Herschel noticed a faint, moving object in the Gemini constellation. He had discovered Uranus. As the new planet completed its 84-year orbit, astronomers observed that its path didn't follow the laws of gravity and planetary motion. Something was altering its course. Scientists predicted the cause—an unknown planet—and calculated its location. Using this prediction, Johann Galle made the unseen known in 1846 when he discovered Neptune.

For Rahab the unseen becomes known too. She has heard the story of God parting the Red Sea so the Israelites could pass through. Now she hears stories of the complete destruction of the Amorite kings near her city. Based on these stories, she understands there's something unseen but powerful at work, impacting the Israelites' path. In a profound profession of faith, she acknowledges the unseen source as the Lord of heaven and earth.

Though God is unseen, He's always with us (Matthew 1:5). Like astronomers observing orbital anomalies, we can look for evidence of His presence in the unexpected. We can marvel at a dew-covered spider web sparkling in the sun, knowing He's the creator. We can trace our life history and see moments when He intervened. We can read His Word and be awed. We can know the unseen!

Father, open my eyes and my heart to Your presence in my life and in the world. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Rahab Is Spared

"Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in the house shall be spared" (Joshua 6:17).

Scripture: Joshua 6:6–17, 22–23, 25
Song: "Never Lost"

The year is 1768. After building a cabin in the wilderness, Matt promises to guard it while his father retrieves the family. At only 12, Matt struggles to survive. When he's injured, the Penobscot tribe cares for him. As winter approaches with no sign of his family, Matt is invited to move away with the tribe. Though tempted, he remains at the cabin, determined to fulfill his promise. This survival story is *The Sign of the Beaver,* but the film adaptation's title focuses on the theme: *Keeping the Promise.*

Today's passage also focuses on fulfilling promises. God promises to deliver Jericho to the Israelites, the spies promise to save Rahab, and she promises to protect them. All the promises are fulfilled, highlighting the promise keepers' faithfulness. But these promises require trust. The spies trust Rahab with their lives, she trusts them with hers, and the Israelites trust God to collapse the city's walls. Obedience is required as well. The spies follow Rahab's instructions, she follows theirs, and God's people march around the city.

Through His Word, God continues to make us promises of salvation, guidance, peace, and protection. He promises never to leave us or forsake us, to love us always. Because God is trustworthy, we can obey Him without fear and find hope in His promises.

Father, as I trust You to fulfill Your promises, may hope and assurance fill my life. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Hold Fast to the Lord

"But you are to hold fast to the LORD your God, as you have until now" (Joshua 23:8).

Scripture: Joshua 23:1–11
Song: "Close to Thee"

"Kids, remember, we've got to stay together." My wife and I made this clear whenever we attended a heavily crowded event. Now that we are grandparents, we express the same concern for our grandchildren. Perhaps nothing creates greater panic than becoming separated from someone in a large crowd.

Aged Joshua has a similar concern for the nation of Israel. However, his primary focus is that the people stay close to the Lord and "hold fast" to Him. The people will have their own "crowds" to confront in the promised land: the pagan nations that remained, along with their gods that would threaten the Israelites' special covenant relationship with the Lord.

Our culture is crowded with all kinds of distractions that could never have entered the minds of the Israelites. But these things are just as dangerous to our relationship with the Lord, for they can serve as "gods" that compromise our devotion to Him and sap our spiritual strength. Let's heed Joshua and "hold fast to the Lord."

Father, in a world that contains so many distractions that have the potential to crowd You out of my life, help me to hold fast to You and never loosen my grip. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

September 29

Reaffirming the Covenant

"You did not do it with your own sword and bow" (Joshua 24:12).

Scripture: Joshua 24:1–13
Song: "Great Is Thy Faithfulness"

While driving our car some years ago, I took a few moments to adjust the rear-view mirror, and to my shock, it came off in my hand! I soon discovered how much I depended on that mirror! My inability to see the traffic behind me made driving much riskier than I desired.

As Joshua nears his death, he looks in his spiritual rear-view mirror and gives the Israelites an important history lesson. He reminds them of their ancestors (including Abraham's father) who worshiped other gods. But Abraham chose to obey God's call, which brought him to the promised land where Joshua and Abraham's other descendants now resided. That same God had kept His covenant with Abraham and directed the conquest of the land so that his descendants could make it to their home. The Israelites could take no credit for this; as Joshua notes, "You did not do it with your own sword and bow."

Looking back in our own "mirror" is one of the most helpful ways to bolster our faith. If you've never done this, make a list of the people and events that have been influential in your life of faith. Review that list often; add to it as necessary. Give thanks for each entry on this list and give thanks to the God responsible for them all.

Father, thank You for Your faithfulness to me throughout my lifetime. Help me never to forget the evidence of that faithfulness. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Obey Christ's Commandments

We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands (1 John 2:3).

Scripture: 1 John 1:8–2:5
Song: "Trust and Obey"

I grew up in the country, not far from a small town in south central Indiana. Whenever I meet someone who is from that town or has heard of it, they sometimes ask me (or I ask them), "Hey, do you know so-and-so?" If we do, neither of us may know the individual in question that closely; but just the fact that we each know someone from a rather unknown location doesn't happen very often.

According to the apostle John, knowing Jesus is more than just a casual acquaintance with Him or a general awareness of who He is and what He has accomplished. Knowledge of Jesus must include steadfast obedience. Obedience to Jesus is a lifelong classroom from which we never truly graduate. Life can bring to us a variety of changes—in our health, our employment, our family, and other areas. But obedience to our Lord must remain a constant priority. John's words about keeping His commands hold just as much authority in the twenty-first century as they did in the first.

People often use the initials "OMG" when texting someone to express the unfortunately offhand exclamation, "Oh, my God!" The next time you see or hear those initials, think to yourself, "*Obey* my God."

Father, help me to examine my life for any areas that have not been fully offered to You in true obedience. Help me to make the necessary changes—*today.* In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

No Turning Back

Jesus replied, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62).

Scripture: Luke 9:57–62
Song: "I Am Resolved"

Going off to college was a big deal for me, as I had not been away from home very much during my first 18 years. The school was around a five-hour drive from my home. My parents drove me to the campus to begin my freshman year, helped me get settled into my dorm room—and then it was time for goodbye. I realized as they drove off that there was no turning back at this point; my life had taken a new direction.

Turning back is not an option for those who choose to follow Jesus. This passage from Luke 9 tells how two of the men who expressed interest in following Jesus wanted to take care of some other matter first (Luke 9:59, 61), as if to say, "Yes, I'll follow You, Jesus, but on *my* terms." Jesus is not interested in our "term limits." To the fully committed disciple, Jesus promises life "to the full" (John 10:10)—with no limits!

Just a few verses before today's passage, Jesus' determined commitment to His Father's purpose is stated in these words: "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). Each day we should "set out" with a similar resolve to follow Jesus.

Father, You gave Your best for me on the cross; help me to give my best to You each day. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

The Greatest Commandments

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37).

Scripture: Matthew 22:34–40
Song: "More Love to Thee"

The topic of who is the greatest in a certain category can produce quite a discussion, especially in the realm of sports. Raise a question in a group setting such as, "Who is the greatest basketball player ever?" and prepare for some lively debate!

There is, however, no debate as to the greatest of the commandments. Jesus makes that clear in our passage from Matthew 22, where one of the experts in the law poses the question in an effort to "test" Him. Jesus' answer is profound, yet simple. The greatest commandment is to love God fully. The second greatest is to love your neighbor as yourself, or as the *Amplified Bible* puts it, "unselfishly seek the best or higher good for others" (v. 39). Loving God is a lifelong pursuit that will enrich any age or stage of life. Obedience to that commandment will manifest itself in love for others, which Jesus declares to be the "trademark" distinguishing His followers (John 13:35).

Regardless of what your occupation or social status may be in this world, if you make it your highest priority to love God and love others, you will be living the life you were made for—the greatest life one can live.

Father, help me to remove any obstacles or distractions that would keep me from loving You fully and loving others freely. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

October 3

God, Deliver Your People

Deliver Israel, O God, from all their troubles! (Psalm 25:22).

Scripture: Psalm 25:12–22
Song: "I Will Sing of My Redeemer"

Some readers will remember the days when S&H Green Stamps were commonly used to obtain a variety of products. When I was growing up, my mother used these when shopping at a local grocery store. Customers received them at the checkout counter, and they could then be redeemed for products from the Green Stamps catalog or store.

To *redeem* something means to gain or regain possession of something in exchange for payment. *Redeem* and *redemption* are used to describe how Jesus paid the price for our sins at the cross so that we might become "repossessed" by our Creator. In today's verse, *deliver* in David's prayer is the Hebrew word meaning "to redeem." While much of Psalm 25 consists of David's personal pleas to God for guidance, in the final verse David expands his prayer to include any of God's people who need such assistance. David's words remind us that while we should freely present our requests to God (Philippians 4:6), those requests should include prayers "for all the Lord's people" (Ephesians 6:18).

David's troubles in Psalm 25 may seem far removed from our twenty-first century culture, but we have our own versions of a snare (v. 15), being lonely and afflicted (v. 16), anguish (v. 17), and distress (v. 18). Fortunately, God still offers "special delivery" as He did to David!

Father, help me to be faithful in prayer, especially for those who are hurting. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

We Will Serve the Lord

"Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve" (Joshua 24:15).

Scripture: Joshua 24:14–27
Song: "This Is the Day"

The afternoon of April 8, 2024, was a memorable day. A total solar eclipse moved across North America, passing over sections of Mexico, the United States, and Canada. Such an eclipse happens when the moon passes between the sun and the earth, completely blocking the face of the sun. The sky darkened as if it were dawn or dusk, and it won't happen again until 2099!

There's a sense in which every day is like a solar eclipse, meaning that it's going to come once, never to be repeated in our lifetime. When Joshua challenges the Israelites to "choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve," he is not thinking only of the day on which he speaks those words. He then establishes a covenant to impress upon the people the solemnity of their promise to serve the Lord (vv. 24–25), as every day must become "this day."

Jesus presents a similar challenge: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). While we designate Sunday as the Lord's Day, we must view every "this day" as His day, a day on which we reaffirm our choice to serve our Lord.

Father, each day is a gift from You. May the choices I make each day be my gift to You. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Christ Died for All

Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope (Romans 5:3–4).

Scripture: Romans 5:1–10
Song: "Hope Has a Name"

Sometimes when we feel like giving up, perseverance shows us what is waiting beyond the suffering. A few years ago, I considered giving up on my master's degree in counseling. However, when I pushed myself to continue, my professor said something that helped me carry on: "You belong in this profession." This one sentence pushed me forward, and I again had hope for my future.

Romans 5:3–4 reflects Paul's experience. We learn from many portions of the New Testament the extent of his suffering. But his determination to persevere meant that the gospel was preached to Jews and Gentiles alike. He delivered God's message of hope to countless individuals who could then be strengthened further.

When hard times hit, there is often a part of us that wants to give up. However, there is often also a part of us that is determined to persevere. If we can rely on God's strength when we are suffering, we can persevere. After all is said and done, we might be pleasantly surprised to see who we've become because of it.

Father, help me to persevere today and to remember the hope You've given me for the future. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Grace Abounds Despite Sin

For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ! (Romans 5:17).

Scripture: Romans 5:11–21
Song: "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross"

Outside a store one day, I laid eyes on a cute little stuffed bunny. I wanted it, but I was a young child, and it was in a claw machine. I did not have the ability or the money to win it. To my delight, my aunt stepped in and won it for me. I named it Whiskers. I still have Whiskers to this day, and I look back fondly on the gift my aunt won for me.

Just as I was not capable of earning that prize for myself, we are not capable of cleansing ourselves of our sin. While some may be tempted to place the blame on Adam and Eve, who committed the original sin, doing so does not address our own. Righteousness is not a gift we can earn ourselves. Thankfully, it is freely given to us through Jesus, who is able to bring forgiveness to us all.

When I see Whiskers in my bedroom, I smile, remembering my aunt's gift. When we look to the cross, we remember Jesus' death that won our salvation, give thanks for God's abundant grace, and feel the joy He brings us through His love.

Father, remind me continually of Your forgiveness. Let that remembrance bring me joy each day. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

October 7

Worship God at the Chosen Place

"There, in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the LORD your God has blessed you" (Deuteronomy 12:7).

Scripture: Deuteronomy 12:1–14
Song: "House of the Lord"

When I was in school, I dreaded working on group projects. When no one could agree on what to do, the project became disunified and people would start placing blame. However, I had one friend who was very much like me. We worked well together, and our work was more unified than it would have been if we were grouped with others.

When the Israelites entered the promised land, God told them to destroy the places of worship set up by the Canaanites, who worshiped many different gods. In contrast to those practices, God said that He would choose a place where His people would come to worship in unity. Just as projects remained true to us when I was with my like-minded friend, worship remained pure when the Israelites came together in one place.

Today, Christianity has spread worldwide, and worshiping in one place as the Israelites did is not possible. However, unity is still important. When we remain unified by our faith, we can have a deepened love and respect for one another that keeps our worship pure before God.

Father, remind me today to love other believers as You have loved me. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Worship God in the Chosen Way

"You must not worship the LORD your God in their way, because in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the LORD hates" (Deuteronomy 12:31a).

Scripture: Deuteronomy 12:20–32
Song: "Who You Say I Am"

"Who am I?" is an important question that I encourage the kids I work with to explore. Many of them—and many of us as adults—try their best to fit in. However, trying too hard to fit in often leads people to lose a sense of who they are. It is when they become confident in themselves that they truly feel empowered to establish their own identity.

In today's passage, God warns the Israelites not to mimic the customs of the Canaanites. The gods of the Canaanites cannot offer the same power and protection that God demonstrates. If the Israelites begin to mimic the worship practices of other nations, they will become something that they're not.

We all want to fit in with others around us. We are meant to be social beings, but our fear of rejection can make us lose a sense of who we are, even who we are in Christ. When that desire to fit in occurs, we can remember who God created us to be and find the empowerment to live as He intends.

Father, I am who You created me to be. Help me to live according to my identity in You. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Put On the New Self

Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things (Colossians 3:2).

Scripture: Colossians 3:1–11
Song: "Treasures in Heaven"

I left a client's home shaking my head, wondering to myself how I could have been so unprepared. It was a Friday, and I was ready for the weekend—so ready, in fact, that I had not planned well for that day's session. I attempted to come up with something on the fly, but it was a disaster, and I felt that I was not much help at all. Because my mind was set on what I wanted to do on my own time, I had lost sight of what I should be doing on my work time. As a result, I was not helpful to my client that session. While I have "work time" and "my time," we are always on "God's time."

In Colossians 3, Paul instructs us to set our minds on heavenly things instead of earthly things. Since we have been "raised" with Christ, we are to put on our "new" selves. These new selves are concerned with God's will rather than our own desires.

When we let our focus drift to earthly things, we lose sight of what God has for us. We become distracted, just as I was that day. But when we fix our sights on heavenly things, we will more easily find ourselves aligned with God's plan.

Father, when I am distracted by earthly things, remind me of what You have in store for me. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Clothe Yourself with Godliness

And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity (Colossians 3:14).

Scripture: Colossians 3:12–27
Song: "The Gift of Love"

"What could you do the next time you're feeling angry?" is a question I often ask the kids I work with. In response, I often hear "Don't swear," "Don't talk back," or any other "don't" statement. What I hear less often are "do" statements: "Walk away," "Take a breath," or "Count to 10." My job is to teach them what *to do.* Otherwise, they will keep doing what they know they should not do. They simply have not learned the skills to avoid the "don'ts."

Many people refer to the Bible as a list of "don'ts." This likely stems from a general knowledge of the Ten Commandments (e.g., Don't lie, Don't steal, etc.). However, just as I must teach kids what to do instead of what not to do, Paul assists us in Colossians 3 in knowing what to do. He sums this up by saying to "Put on love."

This is a *do* statement, and it is a helpful one. When we are trying to decide what to do, we can ask ourselves, "Does this action show love for God and others?" If the answer is yes, then it is a *do.* If the answer is no, then it is a *don't.* When we show love to others, we will help them. We will be kind and honest. This is how He teaches us what is right and what is wrong.

Father, let love guide my actions today. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Faithfulness Despite Disobedience

After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel (Judges 2:10).

Scripture: Judges 2:1–15
Song: "Blessed Assurance"

If you've ever seen two cyclists riding by, you'll notice that one rides close behind the other. This is called drafting. When drafting, the cyclist behind the leader experiences less wind resistance, therefore expending less energy. The second cyclist benefits from the first. If the cyclists break off from one another, it would take more energy to cycle alone.

In Joshua 2, we learn that the generations after Joshua did not know the Lord. We could say that these generations were "drafting" behind those before. The faith of their ancestors kept them going for some time. However, they had not experienced God's power as Joshua's generation had, and their faith never became personal. They did not have the dedication to follow God's will on their own.

While the next generation may draft behind us for a time, there will come a point where their faith needs to be their own. We can't force it on them. However, we can help them to see what a life following the Lord looks like by being positive role models, allowing them to ask questions, and sharing our faith experiences. We cannot guarantee that their faith becomes their own, but we can encourage the process and know God is faithful no matter what.

Father, help me to be a positive role model for the next generation. Thank You for being faithful when I am not. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Courage to Live or Die

For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him (Philippians 1:29).

Scripture: Philippians 1:21–30
Song: "Battle Belongs"

One day, while working as a church receptionist, I noticed that my voice sounded like a cell phone cutting in and out. What I thought was laryngitis was spasmodic dysphonia, a rare neurological voice disorder believed to happen when the brain sends abnormal signals that cause the muscles to tighten or spasm uncontrollably. Botox treatments enabled me to lead women's Bible studies, but eventually their effectiveness wore off.

While in prison, Paul was a powerful voice for Christ, encouraging his brothers and sisters to remember that their suffering was momentary compared to the eternal future awaiting them. He was confident that, despite their persecution, they would live boldly for the gospel and that Christ would be exalted in their adversity, whether in life or death.

When life's heartaches leave us speechless, instead of letting discouragement get the best of us, we must remember that our journey here is temporary. We can keep moving forward because Christ promises to be with us.

Father, help me remember that when my struggles feel overwhelming, You are always with me. Nothing I face can compare to the glorious future in heaven that awaits me. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Let Your Light Shine

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot" (Matthew 5:13).

Scripture: Matthew 5:11–16
Song: "Shine a Light"

The iconic Morton Salt girl has remained the face of the brand thanks to N.W. Ayer & Son, the advertising agency that in 1914 launched one of the most effective branding concepts ever with the slogan "When it rains, it pours." But salt is more than a seasoning. It's a disinfectant, deodorizer, and health remedy. Our bodies require the right amount of it to stay healthy. However, excessive salt intake can lead to serious health problems.

In Jesus' day, salt was used as a preservative and served as a form of payment to Roman soldiers. Jesus' disciples had a preserving influence on their culture. He warned them they would face persecution as a result, but He encouraged them to consider themselves blessed because they made an eternal difference by proclaiming the gospel everywhere they went.

We use terms like "salt of the earth" and "worth their salt" to describe good, honest, hardworking people. Like the disciples, the gospel truth we carry into the world makes an eternal difference in people's lives. As we let Christ's light shine through us, we teach, convict, bless, and encourage the world around us, pointing others to Him through our speech "seasoned with salt" (Colossians 4:6).

Father, help me live each day with an eternal perspective. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Blessed Is One Who Trusts the Lord

Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young—a place near your altar, LORD Almighty, my King and my God (Psalm 84:3).

Scripture: Psalm 84
Song: "His Eye Is on the Sparrow"

Introduced to the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, sparrows represent 36 of the approximately 900 bird species living here. These small, solitary birds can fly almost 24 miles per hour, and they prefer to perch in holes or cracks in buildings. Males begin construction of the nest one to two weeks before the female lays her first egg, allowing her brood to rest and be protected from predators.

In ancient Israel, birds likely sought refuge in crevices within the tabernacle walls. Similarly, God's people found rest in His sanctuary, free from worldly concerns. The tabernacle priests couldn't enter the Holy of Holies without the blood of an animal. But God's Word encourages us that Jesus' sacrifice makes it possible for us to come into His presence at any time, free from guilt.

Like sparrows, our lives often seem insignificant to others. When we feel unseen and overlooked, we can remember that God is intimately acquainted with us, down to the last detail. Nothing we face escapes His attention (Matthew 10:29). Our burdens are lighter when we surrender them to Him.

Father, thank You for promising to care for me. When life's pressures and concerns feel threatening, You care for me infinitely more than any sparrow. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

October 15

Let Us Strive for God's Rest

Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience (Hebrews 4:11).

Scripture: Hebrews 4:11–16
Song: "Rest"

As a type A personality, I suffer from burnout when my to-do list takes priority over my health. However, I'm learning that self-care isn't selfish and that taking time to rest is essential. Overwork also takes a toll on my spiritual health. When I'm "too busy" to spend time with Jesus, I don't receive the strength and wisdom I need to meet life's demands, and I miss out on the fullness of His joy and peace.

Today's passage reminds us that our hearts can't rest in Christ's sufficiency when they are full of pride and self-reliance. God rested after creating the world, not because He was tired but to set a pattern for us to follow.

Psalm 46:10 tells us to "Be still, and know that I am God" because our value isn't based on our productivity but on His grace and power. We will never do enough to measure up to His standard, but when we trust in and rely on Jesus' work on the cross, He promises to give us peace that satisfies our souls.

Father, when I strive to earn Your favor or prove my worth, help me rest in Christ's work alone. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Promise of Better Things

God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them (Hebrews 6:10).

Scripture: Hebrews 6:1–12
Song: "I Will Follow"

When my friend Mary moved to an assisted living facility, a few of us made weekly visits to cheer her up. Some brought flowers or an ice cream sundae; others ran errands or offered to clean her apartment. Following a tiring week of fixing her computer, I was reminded by a friend that God saw our kindness to Mary and would reward us for it.

After rebuking his readers for their immaturity, Paul becomes their spiritual mentor, reminding them not to give up on their faith because God hasn't forgotten their spiritual history. When we backslide, we also must leave the past behind and continue to do good work with faith and patience, relying on the Spirit of God to guide us toward better things.

Spiritual maturity isn't a linear process. We often take a few steps forward and one step back. Instead of letting past mistakes discourage us, we can persevere because God knows our hearts and won't forget our past service. Therefore, we must not grow weary of doing good (Galatians 6:9) because He will equip us to accomplish His purposes.

Father, when spiritual setbacks discourage me, help me remember that instead of holding my mistakes against me, You pick me up so I can start again. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

October 17

God Tests God's People

The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD; they forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs (Judges 3:7).

Scripture: Judges 3:1–7, 12–14
Song: "More Precious Than Silver"

Failing tests is part of the human experience. Whether in school, at an interview, in a relationship, or a million other scenarios, we have all been put to the test and come up short. But the lessons we learn from those tests can be invaluable. Just ask 3M employees Spencer Silver and Art Fry—the inventors of Post-It Notes, whose individual failures led to one of today's most essential office supplies. Silver's adhesive wasn't as strong as intended. Fry's bookmarks kept falling out of his hymnal. The rest is history.

When God tested the Israelites, they failed miserably. They forgot Him, intermarrying with Canaanites and worshiping their deities. Their unfaithfulness angered God, so He sold them into the hands of King Cushan-Rishathaim of Mesopotamia for eight years. But when they saw the error of their ways and cried out to the Lord, He "raised up for them a deliverer" (v. 9) and brought them peace.

The Israelites' unfaithfulness serves as a poignant reminder of how easily our hearts can lead us away from God and that loving anything more than Him is costly. But our Deliverer was raised up on a cross long ago, and when we cry out to Him, God is faithful to forgive us and grant peace that "transcends all understanding" (Philippians 4:7).

Father, when my heart deceives me and I seek fulfillment outside You, remind me that You are my first love and only You can meet my deepest needs. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Restoring Peace to the Land

But on reaching the stone images near Gilgal he himself went back to Eglon and said, "Your Majesty, I have a secret message for you." The king said to his attendants, "Leave us!" And they all left (Judges 3:19).

Scripture: Judges 3:15–23, 30
Song: "Truth Be Told"

In 2010, cereal manufacturer Kellogg's misled consumers by claiming that Rice Krispies boosted children's immunity. As a result, the Federal Trade Commission ordered the company to cease its advertising campaign and pay $2.5 million in damages. In 2013, the company falsely claimed that its Frosted Mini-Wheats improved children's cognitive abilities. These are just two examples of the false advertising companies sometimes use to gain an advantage.

When the Israelites asked God to deliver them from King Eglon, He sent left-handed Ehud, who used bait and switch to mislead the king so he could murder him in secret. But God used Ehud's deception to lead the Israelites to take possession of Moab, striking down ten thousand Moabites, and the land had peace for 80 years.

Telling white lies to get ahead is tempting, but even with the right motive, they're still harmful. What's done in secret may be hidden from others, but God knows our hearts. What a joy (and relief!) to know that God can use even our mistakes to accomplish His purposes.

Father, when I'm tempted, help me guard my heart and walk in integrity. Use even my failures to accomplish Your will. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

October 19

No Other Gods but the Lord

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:2–3).

Scripture: Exodus 20:1–7
Song: "Egypt"

I used to serve in an international Christian school in Thailand. Our teachers were missionaries who raised their own financial support. Each spring, we identified open positions and would pray regularly, often desperately, that God would send teachers for the next academic year. Every fall, He graciously sent new staff, and we would begin the year by thanking Him for the faithful provision of these precious workers.

Today's passage includes the initial verses of the Ten Commandments. Before God tells the people what He expects of them, He reminds them of the love and provision He displayed by delivering them from Egypt. Their understanding of the covenant was rooted in their experience of God taking the initiative to rescue them.

It is just as important for us to pay attention to God's actions in our lives as it was for ancient Israel. When our minds and hearts consistently meditate on all the good things God does in our lives—including sending Jesus to save us from sin and death—gratitude, faithfulness, and obedience are our natural responses.

Father, may Your constant faithfulness motivate me to place nothing above You in my life. Please strengthen me so that I desire to obey all Your commands. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

One God and One Lord

But whoever loves God is known by God (1 Corinthians 8:3).

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 8:1–6
Song: "I've Found a Friend"

I heard someone compare close friendships to mac and cheese; it's what you turn to when you need something familiar and comfortable. There is something profound about journeying through life alongside people who know your authentic self and allow you to know them in the same way. You know each other deeply, but even more you love each other.

Today's passage gives an important warning. While knowledge is good, it cannot be the sole basis for determining our actions. Instead, our behavior must be founded in love. On its own, knowledge can lead to actions that are arrogant and destructive. However, behaviors that are shaped by love for God produce works that build up. The believers in Corinth experienced hurt and division rather than intimacy and unity because they were not acting out of love.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus calls His disciples friends. It is astounding that the incarnate Son of God wants to share that level of connection with us. The best friendships are built on mutual trust and honesty, so we can deepen our knowledge of and love for Christ by listening to His words in Scripture and by being honest with Him in prayer and confession.

Father, I am in awe that You desire a friendship with me through Christ. Help me be as good a friend to others as Jesus is to me. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Worship God Alone

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (Matthew 4:4).

Scripture: Matthew 4:1–11
Song: "I Know Who I Am"

The smell of freshly baked bread makes my mouth water. I am not alone; people all over the planet enjoy a vast array of breads. Artisan bread, loaves of white and wheat bread, banana bread, cornbread, tortillas, challah, bagels, and baguettes fill homes and line the shelves of shops around the world. Perhaps nowhere in the world is bread more beloved than in Turkey, where the average person consumes about 440 pounds of bread annually.

The devil's first two efforts to tempt Jesus question His identity. Jesus' answer to the first temptation is not about bread. It is about the place of God's Word in a person's life. Jesus' reply shows us that allowing Scripture to feed our souls is far more important than the nourishment bread provides our bodies. Because Jesus' identity was deeply rooted in God's Word, He could confidently rebuke the tempter's efforts to create doubt.

Regularly feeding on God's Word is essential to spiritual vitality, including our worship. Attacks on our Christian beliefs, identity, and character come at us from many directions. Saturating our hearts and minds with Scripture allows us to stand firm against challenges and temptations of all kinds because we know who we are—and who God is.

Father, thank You for allowing me to know You through Your Word. May the truths it contains strengthen me daily. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

The Worship of Worthless Idols

No one stops to think, no one has the knowledge or understanding to say, "Half of it I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?" (Isaiah 44:19).

Scripture: Isaiah 44:9–20
Song: "Think on Thy Way"

Hickory with pulled pork, applewood with salmon, and oak with brisket—I love experimenting with different types of wood to bring out the best flavors in the food I smoke. Watching the flames, tending the fire, and spritzing meat provides me with many hours of enjoyment. But it has never crossed my mind to throw out the meat afterward and glorify the wood?

Throughout today's passage, Isaiah rebukes people for worshiping inanimate objects created by their own hands. He is astounded that after baking bread and roasting meat, people would gather up the leftover wood, make an idol, and worship it. He captures the heart of the matter when he says, "No one stops to think," and "A deluded heart misleads him."

While we might not forge idols of wood, iron, or gold, we are as prone to act without thinking or to develop a deluded heart as were the people in ancient civilizations. But as God's people, we must open our minds to His Word and pray to have a pure heart so that we are not led astray into beliefs and actions that are as dishonoring to the Lord as the idol worship in Isaiah's day.

Father, please instruct my mind when I read Your Word and protect my heart from being corrupted by sin. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Return to the Lord

"Sing for joy, you heavens, for the LORD has done this; shout aloud, you earth beneath. Burst into song, you mountains, you forests and all your trees, for the LORD has redeemed Jacob, he displays his glory in Israel" (Isaiah 44:23).

Scripture: Isaiah 44:21–28
Song: "Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah"

I used to help at a week-long Christian summer camp for high school students. A highlight for me was the night we would sit in a field, stare up at the star-filled sky, and worship God in song. The setting reinforced the awesome nature of our Creator and elicited the kind of joyful worship He deserves.

God certainly deserves our praise for all that He has created. However, in an even greater way, He is to be glorified for redeeming His people after they have gone astray. In today's passage, Isaiah describes worship as emanating from God's creation. The heavens, the earth, the mountains, and the forests all rejoice because God has redeemed Israel, and her people have returned to Him.

The crescendo of God's redemptive work came long after Isaiah's lifetime. Every person who has accepted Christ as Savior has experienced God's unmerited grace. This week, meditate on God's grace in your life and praise Him for saving you from your sin. Worship Him with enthusiasm that exceeds the joyful praise in this passage.

Father, thank You for sending Jesus to redeem me from sin through His work on the cross. I can never thank You enough for giving me hope and new life through Christ. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

No One Can Serve Two Masters

The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God's sight" (Luke 16:14–15).

Scripture: Luke 16:13–17
Song: "Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy"

Each November, people across the United States hit the stores on the day after Thanksgiving. Known as Black Friday, this is the biggest sales day of the year for some companies, as over 160 million people seek low prices on retail items. Cyber Monday has stolen some of its glory, but numerous violent fights and even deaths have occurred on Black Friday as people push, shove, punch, and stampede their way to items on store shelves so they can save money.

The love of money is nothing new. Jesus criticizes the religious leaders of His day for having values out of alignment with God's desires. The Pharisees' love of money had so distorted their hearts that they rejected Jesus' message of good news. Their pursuit of earthly security blinded them to their spiritual poverty and need for redemption offered by the Messiah.

Living in a wealthy country can lull us into a false sense of security. Having adequate material provisions makes it easy to think things are fine when, in reality, our spiritual lives may be impoverished. Jesus' words invite us to respond to the good news so that we might be rich in the ways that matter most to God.

Father, please align my values with Yours so that I will desire to serve You above anything else. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

The People Cast Off Restraint

Now this man Micah had a shrine, and he made an ephod and some household gods and installed one of his sons as his priest. In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit (Judges 17:5–6).

Scripture: Judges 17:1–6
Song: "Ancient of Days"

My family lived in Thailand during the final six years of King Rama IX's 70-year reign. Moving from the individual-focused West to the hierarchical worldview of the East required an enormous shift in understanding how people think and act toward one another. Respect for those in authority, particularly King Rama (who was practically considered divine), influenced how people behaved socially.

This passage in Judges recounts an episode in which a man named Micah egregiously violates God's law and undermines the authority of the priesthood at the tabernacle. He set up his own shrine, built an idol, made an ephod, and installed one of his sons as priest. Unfortunately, disobedience (including idol worship) was rampant among the Israelites during this era in which they had no king.

The United States has its roots in a revolution that overthrew a king and has long promoted a worldview in which everyone is of equal value. It can be tempting to make our personal beliefs and preferences the standard for our behavior. But Christ followers are called to submit to the authority of God and His Word. May we desire to do God's will as revealed to us in Scripture, rather than doing only what we see fit to do.

Father, create in me a heart that is willing to submit to You and Your Word. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

God Speaks Through the Prophets

"You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins" (Amos 3:2).

Scripture: Amos 3:1–7
Song: "God Has Spoken by the Prophets"

Living most of my life in Kansas has made me very familiar with tornadoes. One of my earliest memories is swinging on a swing my dad hung in our unfinished basement while we waited out a tornado warning one night. Recently, tornado sirens began blaring outside my home. I retreated to my basement and turned on the news. I rarely pay attention to the weather report, but that tornado warning had me listening closely!

Israel's covenantal relationship with God meant receiving His miraculous provision *and* submitting to His judgment. Disaster was coming because of the people's sins, but God revealed this truth ahead of time. Through Amos, the Lord sought to help the people see that this judgment was a warning sign, a signal to pay attention. Its ultimate purpose was to turn their hearts back to Him.

Whenever we face the consequences of our sin, we have a choice: persist in doing things our own way or listen to the warning signals and return to the heart of God. Through both blessing and judgment, His desire is always that we are restored to Him.

Father, in what areas do I need to confront sin in my life? Help me surrender to Your will. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

October 27

The Prophets Warn and Guide

"I spoke to the prophets, gave them many visions and told parables through them" (Hosea 12:10).

Scripture: Hosea 12:7–14
Song: "God Leads Us Along"

Every year, millions of monarch butterflies travel 3,000 miles from Canada to Mexico and back again. The return journey takes three to five generations, so the monarchs that reach Canada complete the journey their great-great-great grandparents started. Scientists still aren't sure how the monarchs know where to go, but they appear to navigate using the sun's positioning and the magnetic pull of the earth. They follow that internal pull, trusting it to lead them to where they belong.

Hosea 12 is a challenging passage to understand, but one theme runs throughout: our tendency to be blind to sin and to rely on our own abilities rather than God. Ephraim relied on wealth. Gilgal relied on insincere sacrifices. Jacob relied on his own wits and ability. In contrast, the prophets represented reliance on God and submission to His covenant calling on their lives. For Hosea, that calling required him to marry a prostitute who was unfaithful to him—a difficult task indeed. Yet he remained faithful, trusting God's leading.

Following God means relying on Him when He leads in challenging directions. For even then, He is trustworthy. We can submit to His calling, knowing He will lead us where we need to be.

Father, thank You for the prophets' examples. Help me to trust Your leading in my life. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Many Gifts, One God

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:7).

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:1–11
Song: "Many Gifts, One Spirit"

In the elementary afterschool program I help lead, every May we help kids put together goodie bags for the staff at their school. While most kids enjoy the activity, inevitably we have to mediate arguments over the leftover goodies. Who should get to take home the extras? What if there aren't enough gum packs for each kid to take one home? What was meant to produce generosity too often leads to division.

In the Corinthian church, controversy arose over spiritual gifts. Which gift was the best? Should the person with that gift take precedence over everyone else? But in our passage today, Paul drives home this point: each gift comes from the same Spirit, making them equal in value. Just as important, these gifts were designed for the common good of the church.

Even today, spiritual gifts can ignite rivalry. Is rocking babies in the nursery as important as speaking up front? Are the prayers of the grandmother serving on the prayer team as important as the generous financial gift from the middle-aged businessman? Paul's answer would be a resounding *yes.* Each of these gifts and acts of service is not meant to bring division but to unite us under one Spirit for one purpose—the common good of the whole body of believers.

Father, show me how You would like me to use my gifts for the common good of my church community and the body of Christ as a whole. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Orderly Worship

Everything must be done so that the church may be built up (1 Corinthians 14:26b).

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 14:1–5, 26–31
Song: "Gracious Spirit, Holy Ghost"

I recently visited the Palace of Versailles in France. Our tour guide referred to King Louis XIV as the original social media influencer. He had public audiences for everyday rituals like getting up and going to bed, and by creating one of the most lavish palaces in the world, he ensured that visitors would go home talking about him and his reign. Life at Versailles revolved solely around him.

As Paul outlines how spiritual gifts should be used in the church, he calls repeatedly for orderliness and for edification. Prophecy—and any spiritual gift, for that matter—is to be handled in an orderly way so that the focus remains on God, not the speaker, and so that the church is strengthened and encouraged. This requires discernment from leaders and listeners alike.

Even today, we must carefully examine our own motives in using the gifts God has given us. Are we seeking to glorify ourselves or God? Are we acting impulsively based on our own interests, or are we seeking to encourage those around us?

Father, help me to honor You with the gifts You have provided to me. May I be an encouragement to my brothers and sisters in Christ. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

"Here Am I; Send Me!"

"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5a).

Scripture: Isaiah 6
Song: "Refiner's Fire"

I love hiking in a botanical garden a few miles from my home. Not only are the gardens beautiful, but there are several miles of trails that go through the woods and prairie. Every spring, though, the staff performs a controlled burn of the prairie grasses. One day the fields are full and green; the next day, they are black and charred. But by mid-summer, the grasses have grown back to their full height. In fact, fire protects against invasive species, enhances seed production, and improves wildlife habitat.

When Isaiah came into God's throne room, he was immediately aware of a specific sin that made him unworthy to be in God's presence: his unclean lips. Through a seraphim's live coal, God purified Isaiah's lips, and soon, Isaiah was ready to proclaim the Word of the Lord. God took what Isaiah feared would separate him from God and made it the basis of his mission.

Sometimes our sin brings us to our knees in despair before God. We fear His condemnation, but instead He offers purification. But His purposes for us don't stop here. Once redeemed, sometimes the sin we were so ashamed of becomes the very thing God will use to deliver His joint message of warning and grace.

Father, thank You for the ways You take my mistakes and turn them into mission. Here I am. Send me out to do Your will. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Live Worthy of Your Calling

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received (Ephesians 4:1).

Scripture: Ephesians 4:1–13
Song: "O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee"

Over the past five years, I've had the opportunity to mentor a teenage girl. Our friendship has challenged me more than almost any other relationship in my life. From learning teenage lingo to trying to answer tricky spiritual questions, I'm always stretched and challenged by our interactions. Most of all, being her mentor has pushed me to dig more deeply into my own relationship with Jesus, so that I might think and live in a way that honors Him and sets a healthy example for her.

Paul challenges the Ephesian church to live a life worthy of the calling they'd received. This means pursuing humility, gentleness, patience, love for each other, and unity. But this isn't a quest to be pursued in isolation. Their gifts—the graces given as Christ apportioned them—are to be used in service to the body of Christ, to equip each other for service.

When we think of our "calling," it's easy to picture something big, flashy, and earthshattering. But the calling Paul portrays here is simple and down-to-earth, with a focus on humility and caring for others well. At its heart, living worthy of our calling means encouraging and pushing each other toward maturity in Christ. Let's pursue that mission together.

Father, help me to serve well my brothers and sisters in Christ, so that we may build each other up in faith and mature in Christ together. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

The Lord's Servant Is Listening

The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:10).

Scripture: 1 Samuel 3:8–20
Song: "Lord, Speak to Me That I May Speak"

My dad firmly believes that the family dog can talk. "Do you want to play frisbee?" he'll ask her. "You say it. Say *frisbee.*" She'll make an indiscernible, two-syllable little bark, and he'll praise her. I remain unconvinced that she has any idea what she's "saying"—but she is certainly a good listener.

Over and over, today's passage emphasizes the importance of both listening and speaking. God calls out to Samuel repeatedly, and every time He finds Samuel listening. Once Samuel realizes what is going on, he listens fully to the Word of the Lord and re-peats it to Eli. The passage ends with a note that the Lord "let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground." As Samuel spoke the Lord's words, the Lord made sure they were heard and received.

How do we listen and respond to God's words to us today? Is our response, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening?" Or do we shut out His voice with our own fears, doubts, or busyness? If we do listen, do we keep those words to ourselves, or do we pass them along? Let's seek to be both attentive listeners and trustwor-thy spokespersons for Him.

Father, teach me to listen for Your voice and to obey Your words. Help me to share Your wisdom faithfully. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

November 2

The Holy City

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away (Revelation 21:1).

Scripture: Revelation 21:1–4, 19–27
Song: "What a Day That Will Be"

A few years ago, we had a plumbing disaster at our house. The primary bathroom flooded and ruined more than just the sheetrock. The tile and shower had to be replaced, as did the carpet in an adjacent bedroom. At first the hardwood floors in the living and dining rooms looked fine, but by the next day the boards started to buckle. Updating the old house was on our wish list, and the insurance covered most of the cost. We ended up with the most up-to-date bathroom we could have ever wanted!

In this chapter of Revelation, we get a description of the new Jerusalem. Many will recognize it, but as a new and improved version. Some things will no longer be needed, like the temple and the sun because God will finally reside with His people as their light.

There are times in life when we are faced with our own mortality—when someone close to us, a former classmate, or someone younger than us dies. These times are beneficial for reminiscing as we process our grief, but they also remind us that death is not our final destination and that awaiting us is a place more glorious than we can imagine.

Father, no matter what is going on in my life, community, or country, remind me to warm myself in Your glory and hope as described in Your Word. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

The Glory of the Lord

Then the glory of the LORD rose from above the cherubim and moved to the threshold of the temple. The cloud filled the temple, and the court was full of the radiance of the glory of the LORD (Ezekiel 10:4).

Scripture: Ezekiel 10:1–7
Song: "Holy, Holy, Holy"

The long-awaited day had come. The Commander in Chief was scheduled, at short notice, to visit our base. Around-the-clock preparations followed—we scrubbed and cleaned even areas the president would never see, but nothing could be left out. There was a flurry of activity as black SUVs swirled around the roads, waiting to escort the presidential limousine. Everyone was called to attention, and the band practiced "Hail to the Chief." Most of us had never seen a sitting president before. Then a last-minute schedule change meant that we still wouldn't.

If that's how we prepare to honor an earthly president, imagine what it will be like when we see the glory of God in His fullness. In today's passage, Ezekiel describes a flurry of activity with the cherubim, the wheels and burning coals, and the radiance of the Lord. What a picture he paints!

One can only imagine what God's glory will be like. In the meantime, we can experience the glory of the Lord in our private and community worship. We can draw near through reading Scripture and singing praises. We can prepare ourselves for His coming.

Father, I know that I have no concept of Your glory. Guide me as I await the day when I will be in Your presence. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

November 4

A Vision of God's Glory

The glory of the LORD went up from within the city and stopped above the mountain east of it (Ezekiel 11:23).

Scripture: Ezekiel 10:15–19; 11:22–25
Song: "Spirit of the Living God"

The house seemed empty whenever dad left. His work kept him away a lot, so he spoiled us when he was home—it was almost as exciting as Christmas! And when he would leave, our hearts sank. Eventually, we got more used to him being gone, but even then there were times when the emptiness was more than we could bear.

In today's passage, many of the Israelites are already in Babylonian captivity. Part of Ezekiel's vision includes the future promise to replace our hearts of stone with hearts of flesh. Verse 23 foreshadows the destruction of Jerusalem and dispersion of the Israelites. God's presence would leave His people for a time because of their disobedience—but He would not altogether abandon them.

While we will never experience God's total departure from our lives, our rebelliousness can leave us feeling alone and hopeless. Praise God for His mercy and grace and for His Spirit, who changes our hearts and enables us to live with and for Him.

Father, Your lovingkindness cannot be matched. Thank You for Jesus' sacrifice that makes it possible for me to be in Your presence both now and forever. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

We Reap What We Sow

Watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted (Galatians 6:1b).

Scripture: Galatians 6:1–10
Song: "Bringing in the Sheaves"

Years ago, I sat in a class taught by a well-respected pastor. He said something that made a lot of sense to me, and I've carried it with me ever since: "Be careful listening to others' sins and downfalls. Putting those images in your mind can lead to sin." It's ironic that years later I read about his own downfall after being confronted in a compromising position.

Martin Luther said, "We stand on slippery ground; therefore if we wax proud and leave off our duty, there is nothing so easy unto us as to fall. . . . He fell yesterday (saith he), and I may fall to-day." In today's passage the apostle Paul is encouraging us to gently restore a sinning brother or sister with humility. *The law of Christ* may refer to the commandment Jesus gave to us in John 13:34, "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."

When we sow love, we reap love. When we sow humility, we reap humility. This goes far beyond us personally, as the church will be built up when we choose to set aside earthly desires, hold each other accountable, and forgive generously as Christ does.

Father, I praise You for Your unfailing compassion. I lean on You as I recognize my own weakness and need for You in my daily life. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

November 6

When All Is Lost

When they looked up and saw the ark, they rejoiced at the sight (1 Samuel 6:13b).

Scripture: 1 Samuel 6:13–18
Song: "Rejoice in the Lord Always"

I heard a cry from upstairs, "Wow! You'll never guess what I found!" While going through an old box in the attic, my son had recovered a long-lost toy from his childhood. A flood of memories poured over him as he joyfully made plans to restore his newly found treasure to its original glory.

In our passage today, the Philistines return something they had taken as a trophy of war: the ark of the covenant. It had symbolized something for them, but the reality isn't what they expected. For the Israelites, however, the ark is far more than a box on a cart. It is a symbol of their national identity to be sure, but more than that, it signifies God's favor and presence. All is no longer lost, and hope has returned.

What do you rejoice over? What brings you hope when all seems lost? Today, God's people can rejoice in His constant presence and indwelling Spirit as we love, follow, and serve Him.

Father, thank You for the Holy Spirit. Because of Him, I will rejoice continually in Your presence until You return again or call me home. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Promise of a New Body

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:1–10
Song: "Blessed Assurance"

As an American in England, I had to appear in traffic court when I was in my early twenties. In my mind the infraction was trivial, so I nonchalantly went to the British court expecting to pay a fine and leave. The formality of it all made me a little uncomfortable, and I wondered if I was being used to set an example. I expected a slap on the wrist, but I knew I was in trouble when they asked me how I would get to work if my license was suspended. After all, driving was a privilege and not a right.

In ancient Rome a *bema seat* was used for a variety of purposes: public speaking and announcements, legal proceedings, awarding trophies. It signified a place of authority and judgment. But what Paul has in mind here is not the judgment of one's salvation but the rewarding of believers for all they have done for the kingdom.

Unlike my experience of walking blindly into British court, we know ahead of time that we will stand before a fair and righteous judge who will consider all the circumstances surrounding our life. He has given us an example in Jesus and left us His Word to guide our behavior and make us aware of His expectations. Let's take it seriously—not to earn our salvation but to honor the one who offers it.

Father, I tremble at the thought of standing before Almighty God were it not for the assurance that Jesus, my mediator, will stand beside me. Thank You for the assurance of salvation. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

November 8

Rejoice in God's Glory

As she was dying, the women attending her said, "Don't despair; you have given birth to a son" (1 Samuel 4:20a).

Scripture: 1 Samuel 4:12–22
Song: "A Mighty Fortress"

My hometown suffered a series of deaths. Most of the deceased were prominent men who supported the town in ways that made it the community it was. A large void was left, and people frequently said, "I don't know if we can take much more of this." It was sad, puzzling, and caused a lot of grief and despair.

Today's passage describes a tragic day in Israel's history. When the Benjamite returned from the front lines, the news he brought was worse than anyone could imagine. How could they take much more? But the women tending to the pregnant woman saw the good. They recognized the significance of her giving birth to a son, especially since she'd been left a widow.

It's important for us to take a step back when we experience tremendous loss. We don't have the benefit of seeing the big picture that God has. During these times we can rejoice in God's glory and trust fully because of what God has done in our lives, but more important, because of what we can see throughout history in Scripture.

Father, life can seem so confusing at times. I give You thanks for Your written Word, a record of Your work in history and Your faithfulness to Your people. When I can't see in full, help me to rejoice in the knowledge that You can. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

The Lord Is Patient

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

Scripture: 2 Peter 3:9–13
Song: "All in His Own Sweet Time"

As a new parent, I learned that patience was a key requirement when correcting my children. It did not come easily to me. I would lose patience when they erred, especially if I'd told them previously not to do something. Did they listen? Of course not.

Samuel, the prophet, may have felt like losing his patience with God's people. Time and again he instructed them to turn from idols and worship God alone, to give Him their allegiance as their only King. Did they listen? No! Yet Samuel exercised great patience.

How often do we turn from God and worship something other than Him? How often do we disobey God by doing the very things He's instructed us not to? Yet, God is faithful to forgive. His patience is unending. He stalls judgment on sinful humankind so that everyone has the opportunity to repent and believe in Jesus. While not everyone will, *some* will, and He is waiting for their sakes.

Father, I'm grateful for Your patience, with me and our sinful world. Because of Your patience, many will have the chance to be saved. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

November 10

Avoid Worldly Entanglements

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ (Colossians 2:8).

Scripture: Colossians 2:8–15
Song: "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus"

Many were captivated by charismatic leader Jim Jones. They believed he was a prophet and divine healer. When Jones declared that an apocalyptic nuclear attack was imminent, 900 followers moved with him to Guyana. They suffered abuses that prompted an investigation, which led to an attack that killed several people. Panicked, Jones convinced his followers that to avoid punishment, they must commit mass suicide by poisoning. Most believed him and complied.

The Israelites were no strangers to following false gods who made empty promises that often led to devastating consequences. Baal and Ashtaroth both promised success regarding crops and fertility. Samuel continually warns the Israelites, reminding them that satisfaction, fruitfulness, and blessings are found only in God.

Hollow deceptions still abound today, one being that human effort earns salvation rather than divine grace. Satan has convinced many that their "goodness" is enough to secure a place in heaven. As believers, we know otherwise. Yet we still must be vigilant against false doctrines or trends that contradict truth and cling unwaveringly to the knowledge that forgiveness of sins and eternal life are by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

Father, I'm thankful that You opened my eyes and heart to truth. Continue to protect me from deceptions that could lead me astray. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

The Lord Is with His People

"Do not be fainthearted or afraid; do not panic or be terrified by them" (Deuteronomy 20:3).

Scripture: Deuteronomy 20:1–9
Song: "Battle Belongs"

Phil Zielke, founder of the nonprofit Phil's Friends, came under attack by a member of his own board of directors, and Phil was eventually asked to leave. "Satan was always one step ahead, and I had to trust God," Phil recalled. "God made it clear that He would fight for me; I had only to be still and wait. In time, Satan was defeated." Phil was restored to running the nonprofit he'd founded.

Israel seems always to be in a similar predicament, always going to war against a larger, more powerful enemy, always under the threat of an invasion, capture, or annihilation. Is it any wonder they live in a perpetual state of fear? Yet God's prophets continually reassure the Israelites that as God's chosen nation they are in good hands. God is their defender, their mighty warrior. The battle belongs to Him and, hence, victory is assured.

How very similar we are to the Israelites when we face a threat to our security or well-being—physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual. Our initial reaction is fear and panic. In those moments of utter vulnerability, we too are reminded, "Do not be afraid." We're to rest in God's strength and presence as He fights for us, and we can be confident that He is with us and will never leave us.

Father, I thank You that Your strength is my shield and that I can stand firm in Your victory in whatever battle I find myself. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

November 12

Remain Steadfast Under Trial

Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him (James 1:12).

Scripture: James 1:1–12
Song: "When Trials Come"

Adoniram Judson was the first Protestant missionary to Burma in the early 1800s. He spent 40 years there preaching. These years were fraught with many trials: rejection, isolation, the death of two wives and five children, arrest, torture, and imprisonment. Through it all, he persevered. Despite the hardships and heartaches, he never wavered in his calling to preach Christ. And God rewarded his faithfulness. By the time of Adoniram's death in 1850, there were 100 Protestant churches in Burma, with an estimated 8,000 believers. He'd also translated the Bible into Burmese.

Sadly, many people abandon their ministries after encountering multiple trials. They become discouraged and frustrated, so they give up. Not Adoniram, and not Samuel either. For 60 years—from childhood until his death—Samuel persists in preaching, judging, and leading the people of Israel, even when they reject his instructions. Through it all, Samuel maintains his integrity and determination, knowing for whom he is working and to whom he is ultimately accountable.

What has God called you to do? Despite negative responses, resistance, and discouragement, persevere. Faithfully finish what you start, for the crown of life awaits you.

Father, help me remain steadfast and faithful. Strengthen me when I feel like giving up. Give me patience and perseverance. I know I am "working" for You. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

God Hears and Rescues

The righteous person may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all (Psalm 34:19).

Scripture: Psalm 34:15–22
Song: "Psalm 34 (Taste and See)"

One of my children was a troubled teen. I remember the day they broke my heart—no, crushed it. At the height of their rebellion, they got caught shoplifting and were arrested. I could not believe they'd done this terrible thing, and I sobbed and sobbed. I truly believed my heart would break. God heard my cries and comforted me through that awful time.

Samuel too is dispirited over King Saul's disobedience when he does not kill King Agag as he'd been instructed by God to do (1 Samuel 15:2–3). Samuel cannot believe Saul has done this terrible thing, and he "cried out to the LORD all that night" (v. 11). Samuel is then forced to do the awful deed himself. God's "rescue" for Samuel is that Saul is permanently removed from the prophet's life. Samuel no longer has to deal with the sinful king.

For God's beloved children—who are not exempt from trouble—our "rescue" may not be that dramatic. Rather, it manifests as God's abiding presence, His comfort and compassion, His mercy and grace. And He promises to strengthen us and sustain our faith in order to bear whatever heartaches and hardships we experience.

Father, today my heart is broken over _____. I'm grateful that You're near to me now and that You see my sorrow and hear my cries. Deliver me, Father, in Your way and in Your time. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

November 14

The Lord Speaks to the King

"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14).

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:12–16
Song: "Amazing Grace"

Corrie ten Boom was a Holocaust survivor who had been imprisoned in Ravensbruck concentration camp. After she was freed, she wrote her famous book, *The Hiding Place.* After speaking at a church in Munich in 1947, she was approached by a man she recognized—a guard at the camp. He had since become a Christian and asked her directly, "Will you forgive me?" She froze as she pondered her reply but then answered that she would. She writes that she had never known God's love more intensely than at that moment.

In today's passage, King Solomon has finished the temple, and the Lord promises to hear the prayers offered in this place. God goes so far as to say, "My eyes and my heart will always be there" (v. 16). He vows to open His ears to the cries of His children and to forgive and heal them—even when things are at their worst.

No matter the depth or breadth of our sin, God is faithful to forgive and to heal us individually and as a nation when we, as His children, seek Him and repent (1 John 1:9). To repent means that we "change direction," from wickedness to righteousness. We are still prone to wander into sin, but when we genuinely repent, God will hear us and offer immediate mercy, grace, and forgiveness.

Father, please forgive me for my sin of _____. Thank You for hearing this prayer, for forgiving me, and for restoring the joy of my salvation. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Cry to God for Deliverance

"Do not stop crying out to the LORD our God for us, that he may rescue us from the hand of the Philistines" (1 Samuel 7:8).

Scripture: 1 Samuel 7:3–11
Song: "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah"

Crying out to the Lord is, at its heart, an invitation, and one we don't need to be ashamed to practice. It's during moments of utter vulnerability—when we are under enemy attack—that we need to desperately appeal to God for relief and rescue. Samuel's mother, Hannah, knew this and prayed in "deep anguish" to God when she was being taunted by her adversary, Peninnah, because of her barrenness (1 Samuel 1:10).

Satan is our adversary. Scripture warns that he is perpetually on the prowl, "looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8), and his *modus operandi* is "to steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10). He wants to undermine our faith and draw us away from worshiping and serving God. And he will use whatever means possible, including present-day idols: money and material possessions, popularity and appearance, pleasure and performance.

Yet we have an advocate in God through His Son, Jesus. As the High Priest who empathizes with us, we can petition Jesus directly for protection and liberation from our enemies. God is not deaf to us. His "eyes . . . are on the righteous, and his ears are attentive to their cry" (Psalm 34:15); and He promises, "I will deliver you, and you will honor me" (50:15).

Father, thank You for being my rescuer and delivering me from the enemy of my soul, Satan. I will praise You, my shield and my defender. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

November 16

Blessings of a Righteous Ruler

If a king judges the poor with fairness, his throne will be established forever (Proverbs 29:14).

Scripture: Proverbs 29:1–14
Song: "His Name Is Jesus"

In my backyard is a large oak tree. Every year as its leaves fall, I am amazed at the beautiful scenery it creates right outside my window. However, just as important as the leaves of the tree is another part that cannot be seen—the roots. Without the life-giving, nourishing, deeply buried-under-the-surface roots, the leaves would not have life, beauty, and strength.

Many times the suffering ones in our world are overlooked. An honorable king will not only show love to those who are exalted but also to those who have found themselves buried in the dirt. The king who overlooks the oppressed is not godly, and ultimately his kingdom will fall. Israel saw their fair share of kings who acted selfishly in this manner. Thankfully, we now serve a king full of power, integrity, and promise—His name is Jesus.

No matter where you are today, whether buried underground and in over your head or soaring high and basking in beauty and prosperity, you can know God sees you and loves you. He is for you and is always working for your good.

Father, thank You for caring for me even when I have nothing to offer but my life. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

God Appoints Authorities

"He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning" (Daniel 2:21).

Scripture: Daniel 2:16–22
Song: "Dancing on the Waves"

Charles Spurgeon once said, "I have learned to kiss the wave that throws me against the Rock of Ages." Waves can feel violent, unexpected, and disorienting. No one enjoys being tossed around by the storms of life—especially when they seemingly won't retreat or lessen in power. What if those very waves aren't pushing us into a pit of destruction but into the arms of the one who holds all things together?

Daniel doesn't worry about being imprisoned. He knows God is working, even in the darkest depths of his prison cell. He is making a way, even when Daniel sees nothing but darkness. God appoints the humble, filling them with wisdom, understanding, and endurance to foil the plans of the enemy. God will bring peace, provision, and promise into your life. He will not cause the storm, but when the storm comes, He will use it for good.

When things don't seem to make sense, we can fight the wave or lean into it, knowing that the one who controls the wave is ultimately in control of us. You will never be at a loss when you trust God completely for everything you need.

Father, thank You for the overflowing wisdom You pour into my life so I can stand against the storms that come my way. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

November 18

Anointed for God's Service

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free" (Luke 4:18).

Scripture: Luke 4:14–21
Song: "Desert Song"

I remember learning to ride a bike as a child. My dad took me into the narrow alleyway near our home. To my left was a field lined around its perimeter by a barbed wire fence. When my father's hands were on me, I had no fear of riding without training wheels. However, fear set in when he would let go. All I could think about was the horrible crash and burn into the prickly barbed wire fence, should I fall. When my dad's hands returned to my shoulders to guide me again, I went from feeling terrified to unstoppable.

In the verses just prior to today's passage, Jesus goes into the desert and finds Himself tempted, tired, and weary. But verses 14 and 18 tell us that He comes out "in the power of the Spirit," anointed to "proclaim good news." God the Father's hands are on Him, ready to take Him from being tempted to triumphant, fulfilling Scripture in the presence of those who oppose Him.

Every day I start with a pulse check—not mine, but God's. Am I welcoming Him into my life? When I am with Him, I am reminded I have been anointed for a purpose, a task so rewarding I wouldn't dare do it without His hand in the situation and on my life. With God, I cannot fail.

Father, thank You for guiding me. When I feel out of balance, You keep me steady. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

God Rejects Saul

"I regret that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions" (1 Samuel 15:11).

Scripture: 1 Samuel 15:10–23
Song: "Heaven's Song"

Our church has a 24-hour prayer facility. One afternoon my wife and daughters visited, and the exercise involved writing on a small chalkboard circle an area of your life that you're giving to God. The idea was then to leave the circle in a basket. As we walked out, my seven-year-old quickly placed something in her pocket. When asked, she pulled out her circle. She had followed the instructions up to a point but got distracted by her own ideas.

Saul, a man anointed by God as king of Israel, fights a good fight and defeats the Amalekites. Despite the victory, he doesn't obey completely. He goes partway then has some ideas of his own. Samuel reminds Saul that more important than a sacrifice is obedience to God, fully doing what He says.

In *The Empire Strikes Back,* Yoda advises: "Do or do not. There is no try." Obviously there are many times when we sincerely try to obey God and fall short. The trouble comes when we're content to live in that halfway space. Full obedience to God shows that we trust Him and submit to His will fully. Anything less shows a reliance on our own strength and a desire to fulfill our own desires. And that kind of commitment is no commitment at all.

Father, thank You for forgiving my mistakes, errors, and shortcomings. Teach me to obey You wholeheartedly. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

November 20

God's Righteous Servant

Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place. A large crowd followed him, and he healed all who were ill (Matthew 12:15).

Scripture: Matthew 12:14–21
Song: "The Way"

One day leaving the grocery store I was sitting at a stoplight behind a large white SUV. On the bottom corner of the rear window was a sticker that read, "Do you follow Jesus this closely?" At first glance I laughed to myself and thought, well that is a "dad joke" if I have ever seen one. While not overly profound, the saying does align with Scripture to show the importance of following Jesus—not from a distance but closely.

Many people followed Jesus as He traveled throughout Israel across the desert and into the mountains, across rivers and seas, and on flat land. They wanted Jesus, and they wanted to be within arm's length of Him—and for good reason. Many people were physically healed in Jesus' time. But today's Scripture reminds me that *all* who follow Him are healed in the ways that matter most and last longest.

Following Jesus can feel dangerous. It can seem daunting and uncertain every step of the way. But when we make the choice to follow God's righteous servant closely and fully and anywhere He leads, we walk from hurt to healing.

Father, thank You for being our *Jehovah Rapha* (the God who heals). In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Do Not Judge by Appearance

The Jews there were amazed and asked, "How did this man get such learning without having been taught?" (John 7:15).

Scripture: John 7:14–24
Song: "Man of Sorrows"

Being underestimated is never a comfortable thing to walk through. I felt this way recently, as I completed Bible college but have found myself working in financial services for the past decade. As I poured myself into learning about Jesus and His life, my career in finance began to take off. While this is a great thing, it seemed strange. I felt I had been called to study and to amass large amounts of information about the Bible in order to use it to help others. While this could potentially be a noble thing to do, God has shown me that knowledge isn't what makes me a valuable player on His team. Christ living in me is the most important part of my life.

The religious leaders in Jesus' day equated book smarts with status. These men studied for years under a rabbi and were well known, qualified, and admired. The thought of being a powerful piece in God's kingdom without first having attended the "Ivy League schools" of the day was unheard of to them. They couldn't wrap their minds (or their hearts) around Jesus.

Time and time again in Scripture and in today's world we see how attempting to live in our own power, understanding, and might will land us in dangerous territory. Rather, a humble life leaning on God's grace over our own merit will lead us to a blessed and prosperous place.

Father, thank You for strengthening me in my weakness. Help me to look at things—and at people—the way that You do. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

November 22

God Looks on the Heart

But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him" (1 Samuel 16:7).

Scripture: 1 Samuel 16:4–13
Song: "You Say"

There is nothing overly creative about the cover of most Bibles. Unlike social media platforms and Hollywood powerhouses that invest millions of dollars in creative campaigns and movie trailers, the Bible generally has limited text or graphic design on it. My first Bible still sits on a shelf in my prayer room. It is a study Bible with a black leather cover, and my name is engraved in silver text on the bottom right-hand corner.

In today's passage, God reminds Samuel that the cover doesn't tell the story. It's just an outer shell that covers up the true tale, one that can only be revealed by opening the book and looking inside. God has chosen David to be the next king because of what is inside—a heart surrendered to God, modeled after His own.

As I navigate life, it becomes more apparent on a daily basis that I may not be the best-dressed, the strongest, or the smartest person in the room. But I do have something on the inside that will propel me forward. With God's indwelling Spirit, I can rest assured that no matter what things looks like on the outside, His plans for me are still good.

Father, thank You for seeing me for who You created me to be—even when the world sees otherwise. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

God Defends the Chosen King

"I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain" (Psalm 2:6).

Scripture: Psalm 2
Song: "Before the Throne of God Above"

If you've ever bought a home, you know how complicated it can be. My neighbors spent two months prayerfully seeking to buy their first home. Each time the sale would close, unwelcome requirements blocked it. Finally, on the Friday deadline, the lender phoned: "I pushed the sale through! You'll receive the keys to your new home on Monday." It was finally a done deal.

In 1 Samuel, God selects a tall, handsome king to lead His people. Then we see Saul's downfall as he exalts himself in defiance of the Lord. Psalm 2 describes the folly of such rulers. In contrast to rebellious, self-serving people, the Son of God is presented, *installed* as God's chosen king on Zion. Did you notice the use of past tense? It's a "done deal." Jesus is Lord. He already has the keys to God's kingdom, even as Saul struts across the land.

Against the present-tense description of all those lifting violent enmity to God is the image of God's sovereign king, accompanied by the command to serve Him with reverence and obedience. All this will pass away, but He will remain, installed as God's chosen king. What a rock-solid promise for us to stand on!

Father, thank You for installing Jesus as my *Redeemer King.* May I live in the light of His glory and celebrate His rule with obedient love. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

November 24

Heir of God's Promises to David

"From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised" (Acts 13:23).

Scripture: Acts 13:21–24, 32–39
Song: "You Keep Your Promises"

In 2004, my coworker with Mercy Ships felt called to help the displaced boy soldiers in Freetown, Sierra Leone, where we were moored. I glibly promised financial support, with an offer to come assist her later. However, a brutal accident immobilized her daughter and required her to leave the ministry for a time. When she returned, I gladly supported her financially. But when she called in my promise to assist her in person, I didn't go.

One aspect of God that astounds me is that He doesn't neglect His promises—even when we're not faithful. He tells David about Solomon, "He is the one who will build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. . . . Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever" (2 Samuel 7:13, 16). As a man of war, David knows how suddenly kingdoms can fall; he is dumbfounded.

God is unflinching in fulfilling His promises. We read in Hebrews 1 that God's promises are fulfilled in His Son, Jesus. While Jesus is the heir of God's promises to David, through Christ we are heirs to His kingdom—heirs who did nothing to earn such a gift.

Father, thank You for your faithfulness. Help me to see clearly the riches of Your promises to which I'm an heir, and to exalt You. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

A Deliverer Out of Zion

For God's gifts and his call are irrevocable (Romans 11:29).

Scripture: Romans 11:23–29
Song: "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus"

A hunter settles into a tree stand in the night, waiting for the hint of dawn. A massive elk bugles in the distance, and the hunter mimics a response. The call to battle: the October summons of the rutting season. All the land about knows this irrefutable sound. The elk cows lift their heads in interest, and the bull elk seeks his rival.

God gave the mighty elk a bugle toward his mates, and God also gifted us with His resounding call toward Christ, our deliverer out of Zion. Can we hear it? Many other aspects of life will seek to deceive us with their trumpeted invitations. Paul reflects in Romans 11 on how Israel had thus been drawn away from God, hardening their hearts. But God's call travels to the depths of our hearts, urging us to embrace the deliverer who fulfills His covenant by forgiving our sins.

Such a call! While people across the United States are preparing for their annual feast of Thanksgiving tomorrow, all of us can embrace *thanksgiving* today as we reflect on Jesus' gift of deliverance from sin and brokenness, for God has declared that His gifts and call are irrevocable.

Father, thank You for your gifts and call, expressions of Your profound love. May I respond wholeheartedly. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Look Upon Zion!

Look on Zion, the city of our festivals; your eyes will see Jerusalem, a peaceful abode, a tent that will not be moved; its stakes will never be pulled up nor any of its ropes broken (Isaiah 33:20).

Scripture: Isaiah 33:15–22
Song: "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken"

The picture of the ashen rectangle with its solitary chimney rising from the rubble shocked me. My friends in Kenya had worked so hard to build that house. It was part of their ministry to missionaries needing a place of refuge and recovery. As I prayed, though, the peace of God filled me. He is the real owner of that land, and His ministry endures forever. I knew He would raise up a blessing out of this heartache.

Isaiah pens today's Scripture when Sennacherib of Assyria is ravaging the land and heading to assault Jerusalem. As city after city falls into ruins before his mighty army, Sennacherib mocks the Lord Almighty. God's Word and His spiritual kingdom stand. Af-ter 185,000 Assyrian soldiers die at God's hands, the king himself returns home and is murdered by his own sons. God defends His righteous name and proclaims His sovereignty.

On earth, Jerusalem still stands after thousands of years. However, the forever city of God is a heavenly city that truly will not be moved. God is in the midst of her. And, even now, He is in the midst of us. Let this be the focus of our celebration.

Father, I rejoice that You and Your kingdom cannot be moved, and You are prepar-ing me to take my place there with You. Blessed be Your name. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

The Lord Has Chosen Zion

For the LORD has chosen Zion, he has desired it for his dwelling, saying, "This is my resting place for ever and ever; here I will sit enthroned, for I have desired it" (Psalm 132:13–14).

Scripture: Psalm 132:8–18
Song: "Be Thou My Vision"

When COVID-19 terminated my work overseas, I returned to the United States and lived with a friend for months. My town of Bend had developed beyond my budget, so I settled in Salem, Oregon, where I could afford the rent. I now claim Salem as my home, seeking Oregon's healing as I live in her capital city.

I wonder at God choosing Jerusalem, "Zion," as His earthly capital. Although a center of controversy and violent struggles, no one doubts its spiritual significance. David conquered it over 3,000 years ago, and it has been the heart of Israel ever since, even when her people were scattered without a homeland for 1,800 years.

Zion. The word breathes deep meanings, always rooted in God Himself. It is a sacred place, a land of holy rivers, a sanctuary, the resting place of God. Yet our heavenly Father chose human hearts as the true home of His Spirit. Here He sits forever enthroned, glorious and sovereign.

Father, thank You for choosing Zion, and thank You for choosing me. Reign in my heart now. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

From Jerusalem to the Nations

And repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem (Luke 24:47).

Scripture: Luke 24:44–49
Song: "All Glory, Laud, and Honor"

When I throw a rock into a pond, I love watching the displaced water roll out concentric ripples until the surface tension stills the pool again, the input energy all used up. Ah, but when wind blows over a body of water, its steady ripples gather energy, become waves, and overcome the resisting surface tension. Ocean swells can travel thousands of miles.

It all starts in Jerusalem, the city of God, where Jesus was crucified, where He rose from the dead, and where His followers were first baptized and received the Holy Spirit. In John 15:5, Jesus says that apart from Him we can do nothing. We're like the little ripples in a pond. His Spirit is the wind that swells in us to carry the Word out to all the world. The surface tension of culture and principali-ties and powers cannot stop His incoming truth. That truth? That in Christ all is forgiven, and we have a future and a hope.

It's all about Zion, God's very real dream for us: God with us, offering a forever future. His peace in vibrant life. And we are His ministers, reconciling the world to Him through Christ's invitation.

Father, I rejoice that, by the Holy Spirit, I can carry Your truth with me every day to others, a ripple effect of forgiveness, hope, and love to the world. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

God Establishes David's Kingdom

Then David knew that the LORD had established him as king over Israel and had exalted his kingdom for the sake of his people Israel (2 Samuel 5:12).

Scripture: 2 Samuel 5:1–12
Song: "Oceans"

Sometimes we are called to rise up beyond what anyone can imagine us doing. Such was the case for me. I struggled in school because my eyes didn't work together; print didn't stand still, and charts shifted. My illegible writing slid off the lines. Hard work, demanding (even threatening) teachers helped me overcome. But it was a struggle, and I disliked school—a lot! When returning to school in my thirties, imagine my surprise when I felt led to pursue a career as an educator.

David is the youngest son, designated as the family shepherd, forgotten when Samuel calls the sons of Jesse to a feast. Imagine the surprise when that boy becomes the anointed king of Israel and claims Jerusalem for God! How can it be? We ask that question of God over and over. With God, all things are possible. And David knows it. He has consecrated his heart and kingship to the living God and utterly delighted His heavenly Father.

So, when others are surprised by where we are headed in life, we can think of David. Just as God established David's kingdom because of God's love for His people, so He will establish us when we consecrate our hearts and lives to Him. He delights to walk with us.

Father, help me consecrate my life to You, that You might build Your kingdom through me. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

A Healthy Mindset

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6–7).

Scripture: Philippians 4:1–9
Song: "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus"

I was a candidate for a church music position and was scheduled to meet with the choir to teach and conduct two anthems. I'd allowed extra time for travel, but it wasn't enough to account for a complete traffic standstill. To say I was anxious is an understatement. And this happened before smartphones—so I couldn't even call ahead. Humiliating.

As I waited, Philippians 4 reminded me to be anxious for nothing and to bring every situation to God in prayer. When I finally arrived, I was stunned to find everyone still there and willing to proceed with the audition. The first anthem had been assigned, but the other was my choice. It just so happened the piece I chose was composed by the other candidate for the position. We all laughed over this "coincidence." The tension over my late arrival? Completely defused.

I had indeed been anxious for nothing. And, in hindsight, if I'd had a smartphone, I might have missed an amazing spiritual lesson.

Father, thank You for guarding my heart and my mind. Remind me to come straight to You and to rest in Your unfathomable peace. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Prayer List

A regular devotion time is the perfect moment to go to God with requests, concerns, and praises. Use this space to remind yourself of particular needs that you wish to bring before God, and be sure to capture how you experience God's answers to your prayers.

Name	Request/Concern/Praise

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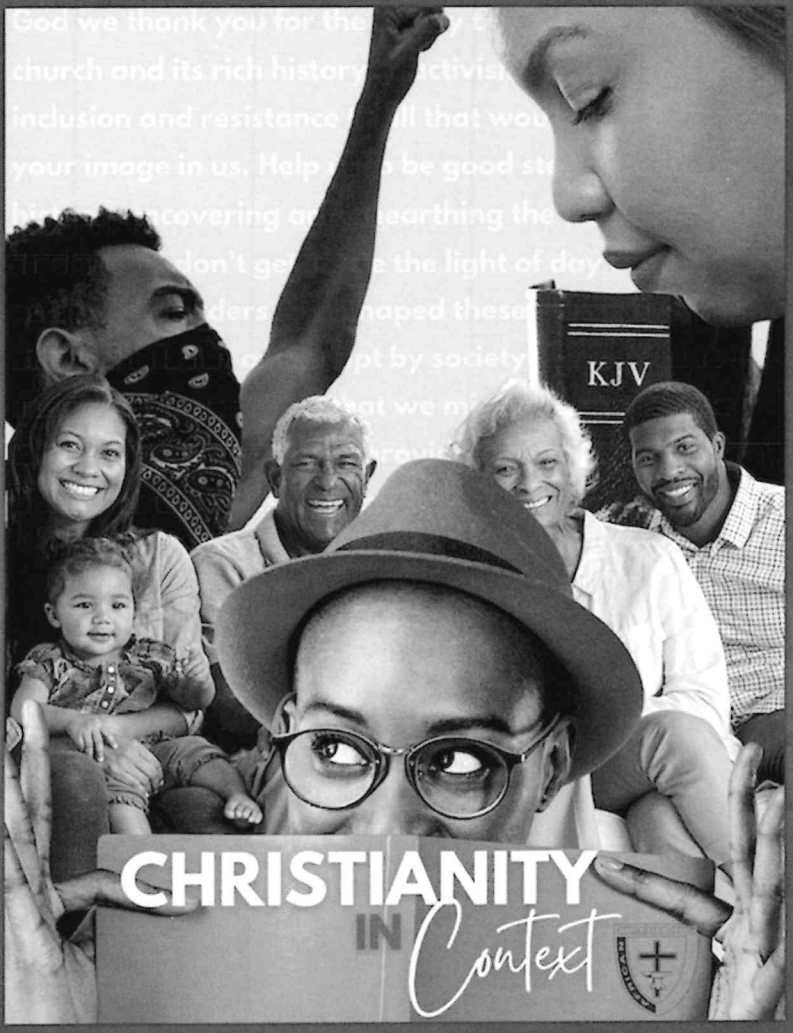

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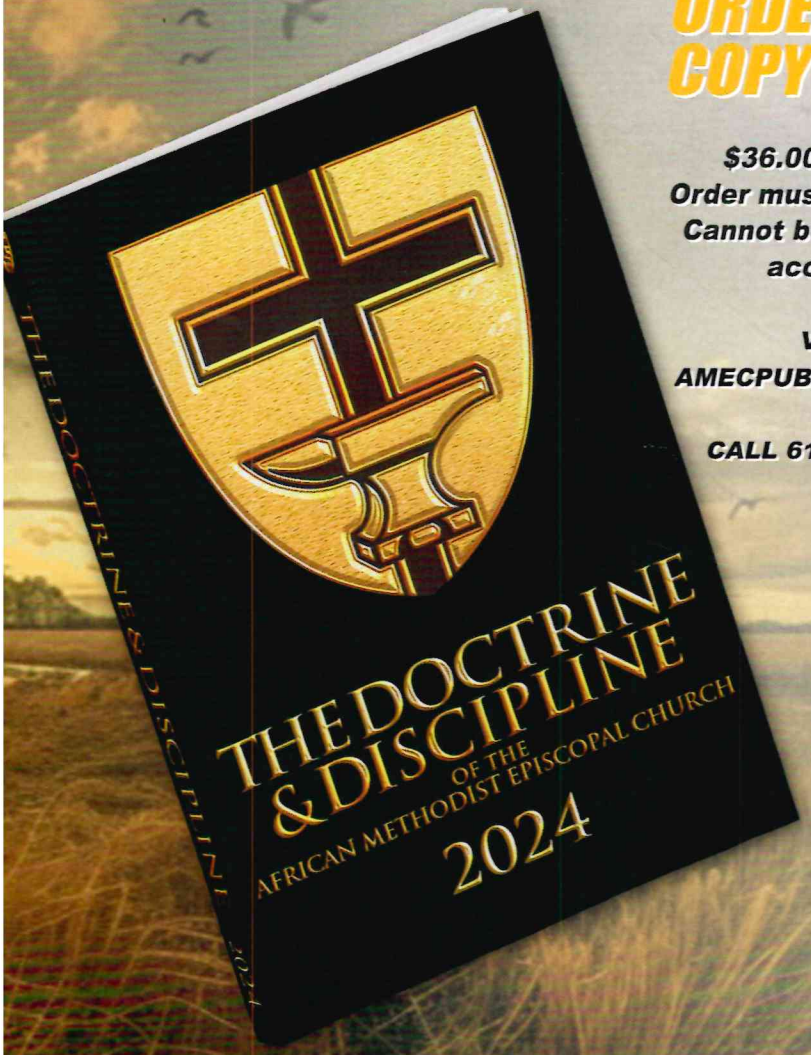

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