
RECEIVING GOD'S GOODNESS

MARK 6:1-3

God's Delivery Method

And they took offense at him.

Mark 6:3b

Have you heard of the acronym FOMO? It stands for the “fear of missing out.” Most of the time the term is used in reference to young people and the anxiety they endure after seeing what their peers are posting on social media. But I think it applies to all of us in relation to our faith. We sometimes think God is speaking more clearly at the church down the street or in the other small group or through the author everyone else is reading. We think God can't possibly be speaking to us in our current location and in our current circumstances. That's what the people thought in Jesus' hometown: God can't possibly be speaking to us through little Jesus, whom we watched grow up.

Take a moment to pause and look around. What amazing thing might God be doing right in front of you that you might be dismissing by doubting the delivery?



Help me to recognize you, O God, even in the most unlikely circumstances. Give me ears to hear and eyes to see you moving in my midst. Amen.

Andy Blackwelder, Greeneville, Tennessee

FRIDAY, JULY 2, 2021

RECEIVING GOD'S GOODNESS

MARK 6:4-6

Hindering the Gift

And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Mark 6:6

Jesus was prepared to offer the fullness of God's glory, but the people's skepticism hindered his opportunities to provide it. Our faith itself is a gift from God, but as with all gifts, the recipient has the right of refusal. Choosing to believe or not believe does not make something so. I might believe I'm the world's best chef, but my crispy, blackened burgers tell a different story. I might choose to believe it's not raining, but when I walk outside, I'll still get wet. The people in Jesus' hometown chose not to believe in his power. Their disbelief didn't render him powerless; he still laid hands on a few sick people and healed them. Instead, their disbelief blinded them from seeing the life-giving miracle before them.

I wonder what kinds of miraculous signs God has unfolded right in front of me that I have not fully received because I refuse to see them. I wonder what miraculous things God is doing even now.



Open my eyes to see you, O God, and my heart to receive you. Amen.

Andy Blackwelder, Greeneville, Tennessee

RECEIVING GOD'S GOODNESS

MARK 6:7-13

Welcoming the Word

If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet.

Mark 6:11

The word of God can come to us in mysterious ways. God spoke to Moses through a flaming shrub. Abraham encountered God through traveling strangers. A woman received God's word at the community well in the midst of completing her daily chores. An Ethiopian court official received God's word from a nosy stranger who approached his chariot. These stories and countless more would be very different if not for one simple component: openness.

Many of us long to hear God's voice and wonder when we might receive a word but never seem to hear anything. Is God silent, or are we inattentive? How might life be different if we approached every encounter with a stranger, every chance occurrence, and every conversation as an opportunity to receive a word from God? The almighty is speaking. May we be open to hear and receive.



I might have difficulty recognizing your voice, O Lord, but please never stop speaking your word to me. May I be open to receiving your goodness, no matter how you choose to share it. Amen.

Andy Blackwelder, Greeneville, Tennessee

DEALING WITH PRIVILEGE

EPHESIANS 1:3–8A

Recognizing Freedom

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us.

Ephesians 1:7–8a

I've never lived in a place where purchasing and shooting fireworks was legal. So it has always been the epitome of irony to me that my neighbors celebrate their independence by lighting fireworks, effectively breaking the law. The very structures that afford us autonomy empower us to make choices that violate them. Most of us simultaneously value freedom and undermine it constantly.

God went to great lengths to liberate and release us from the burden of sin. In Christ we are free! What have we done to deserve this? Have we followed all the rules? Have we confirmed ourselves to be worthy? Often, we do just the opposite. Our efforts have proven only to offend. The harder we try, the farther we fall. In Christ we are free, and yet we still struggle, day in and day out. Fortunately for us, God's grace overflows. In Christ, every bad decision, misjudgment, mistake, and shortcoming is washed away again, and again, and again.



God, our redeemer, thank you for accepting us just as we are. Even flawed and imperfect, you love us still. Amen.

Andy Blackwelder, Greeneville, Tennessee

DEALING WITH PRIVILEGE

PSALM 24

Gaining Perspective

*Those who have clean hands and pure hearts . . .
will receive blessing from the LORD.*

Psalm 24:4–5

It's good to be in the loop, to know you belong, to be accepted for who you are. We all seek validation and approval. All of these things and more are poured out on us by the God who created and loves us beyond measure. But there's a problem.

Many of us were taught to read Scripture from the perspective of the “good guys.” Because we know the end of the story, we read the psalmist's words as a people redeemed rather than as the perpetrators of injustice. So what's the issue? We subconsciously learn to overlook the fact that none of us have clean hands. None of us have pure hearts. Therefore none of us are worthy of God's blessing. Our hands are clean and our hearts are made pure only by God's grace.

If God can look deep within me; see every nasty thought, impure motive, and evil desire; and still extend grace and make me clean, perhaps I can attempt to exercise even a fraction of that grace with my neighbor.

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*Release me from any feelings of entitlement, O God,
and remind me daily of your mercy and grace, with-
out which I am nothing. Amen.*

Andy Blackwelder, Greeneville, Tennessee

TUESDAY, JULY 6, 2021

DEALING WITH PRIVILEGE

2 SAMUEL 6:5

Bursting with Joy

*David and all the house of Israel were dancing
before the LORD with all their might.*

2 Samuel 6:5a

I was eleven years old, and it was past my bedtime. My favorite team was playing in the championship game, which was in overtime. Curiosity overcame my brother and I, so we quietly turned on the TV in our shared bedroom and watched the muted screen. With 2.1 seconds remaining, down by one point, I didn't think there was much hope. But a full court pass and a turnaround jumper at the buzzer gave my team the win! I flung open the bedroom door and ran through the house shouting in joy. I had never worn the jersey, but I felt the victory.

David and the people of God were parading through the streets, transporting the ark of God, and they danced with all their might. Joy is contagious and can draw in even those watching from a distance. I'm trying to remember the last time I had a buzzer-beater, championship game-winning reaction to all that God is doing. Our God is worth celebrating, and there's enough joy to go around.



*Overwhelm us with joy, we pray, and receive our
elation—even dancing—as our offering of thanks.
Amen.*

Andy Blackwelder, Greeneville, Tennessee

DEALING WITH PRIVILEGE

PSALM 85:8–13

Listening Intently

*Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people.*

Psalm 85:8a

I've always wondered about receiving signs from God. When I hear people talk about signs they've received, I find myself thinking of all the other ways they could have interpreted the sign. A lot of times their story includes a sign that nudged them in the direction they were already hoping to go. Either God is extremely accommodating or some of us are misinterpreting signs. Or could it be that our hopes open us to participate in the message God has for us?

What the psalmist longs to hear is shalom—peace, contentment, completeness. Don't we all? What if God is speaking shalom to us today? How would we know it if we heard it? That's part of the journey, but the psalmist says with confidence: God *will* speak peace to his people. May we live with assurance that God's word for us is shalom. May we live with the hope that our ears may be tuned to hear God's voice.



*Never stop speaking, Lord, and give us ears to hear.
Amen.*

Andy Blackwelder, Greeneville, Tennessee

THURSDAY, JULY 8, 2021

DEALING WITH PRIVILEGE

AMOS 7:7–15

Shushing Influence

“O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there.”

Amos 7:12

As the nurse was leading me to an exam room, she stopped by the scale. I wondered what my weight might have to do with my sore throat, but I reluctantly climbed on. After the exam, the doctor wanted to talk about the number in my chart. I wanted to walk out. I wasn't here for a lecture on my diet and my exercise habits. But it was a conversation I needed to have, so I had to endure it.

Amos was given a word from God to deliver to Israel, and it wasn't good news. The priest Amaziah told Amos to keep on moving and stop all the negative talk. Amos assured him that the word was not his own but a warning from God.

I am more like Amaziah than I like to admit. I, too, want to hear from God only when it's an affirming and reassuring word. But if God's word never challenges us—if it never says anything we couldn't just say to ourselves—we have no use for it.



God, help us to hear your word, even when it is hard to accept. Amen.

Andy Blackwelder, Greeneville, Tennessee

DEALING WITH PRIVILEGE

MARK 6:17–29

Silencing Truth

For John had been telling Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him.

Mark 6:18–19a

I hope we all have trouble relating to this story in Scripture because it ends with John’s head being presented to a woman who promptly gifts it to her mother. Not exactly a story we dwell on in children’s Sunday school. This story, however, may be more familiar than we realize. John is silenced for speaking truth. In a disruption of King Herod’s dramatic saga, John spoke out against the abuse of power he witnessed. While everyone else bit their tongue, John spoke. The truth John spoke ultimately led to an elaborate scheme to make sure his voice was never heard again.

We need voices of accountability in our lives. Unfortunately, most of us silence those voices by ignoring them, dismissing them, or burying them under other opinions we’d prefer to hear. Maybe we’re not calling for anyone’s head, but just because a voice makes us uncomfortable or inconvenienced doesn’t mean the person speaking deserves to be silenced. Sometimes those messages that are hard to accept are the very words of God.



Brace us, Lord, to hear your voice even when your message unsettles us. Amen.

Andy Blackwelder, Greeneville, Tennessee

SATURDAY, JULY 10, 2021

DEALING WITH PRIVILEGE

EPHESIANS 1:12–14

Receiving the Blessing

In him you also . . . were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit.

Ephesians 1:13

I have not often participated in the Black Friday shopping frenzy on the day after Thanksgiving, but one particular year my wife and I arrived early to stand in line for a door-buster deal. The deal was too good to pass up, and we were convinced the hundreds of people in front of us would snatch up the store's supply. We began to convince ourselves that there was no way we'd be fortunate enough to leave that day with what we came for. Then the doors opened, and everyone pushed their way into the store and scattered throughout the aisles. We walked briskly, directly to the item. No one else was around. It occurred to us then that every person in the store thought every other person was after the specific thing they wanted. We all created competition where there was none.

It's hard for many of us to fathom that God's love does not follow the laws of supply and demand, but rest assured: there's enough to go around.



We know your love is not in limited supply. Help us not to create an atmosphere of competition where there is none. Amen.

Andy Blackwelder, Greeneville, Tennessee

COVENANT PROMISES

2 SAMUEL 7:4–14A

House and Home

Are you the one to build me a house to live in?

2 Samuel 7:5a

I've lived in six different homes as an adult. One was a brand-new house on a cul-de-sac, in a great neighborhood for my then-young sons. During the years we lived in that house, the boys moved from daycare to middle and high school. My marriage ended. I changed jobs not once, but twice. We went from not knowing a soul to having many close friends, thanks in no small part to our active participation in a local congregation—a house of worship that was, for us, a home.

The time came for us to make a big move to a new city and new schools for all three of us. We were starting anew, but we weren't starting over. The foundation of faith and family we built, with God's help, traveled with us. God was with us as we set up house and found a new congregation in which to worship and serve. As with David, the Lord went with us, making each house a home along the way.



God of covenant promises, use me to build your house wherever I find myself. May it be a house for all people and creatures, great and small. Amen.

Sarah Erickson, Stone Mountain, Georgia

MONDAY, JULY 12, 2021

COVENANT PROMISES

PSALM 89:20–37

No Expiration Date

*Forever I will keep my steadfast love . . .
and my covenant . . . will stand firm.*

Psalm 89:28

A semiannual ritual at my house entails cleaning out the fridge, freezer, and pantry before Thanksgiving and again around Easter. Among other things, it helps me manage the life cycle of food and avoid waste. I know what I have on hand and plan accordingly.

Foodstuffs have expiration dates. Work projects have deadlines. Bills need to be paid, or utilities will be shut off. But as today's psalm reminds us, God's love is steadfast. While I may have to manage the contents of my vegetable drawer, I don't have to worry about the shelf life of God's covenant promises. I'm not off the hook for being accountable for my behavior, but I'm not going to be consigned to the compost heap, either. Such assurances help me to stand firm in the face of the daily grind, knowing that God's steadfast love undergirds and guides me, each step of the way.



When I am uncertain of your steadfast love, gracious God, remind me that your faithfulness knows no bounds. Amen.

Sarah Erickson, Stone Mountain, Georgia

COVENANT PROMISES

JEREMIAH 23:1–6

The Master's Trainers

I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.

Jeremiah 23:4

In some training programs, one can earn the title of Master Trainer. That designates a degree of expertise in a field or skill as well as the ability to teach it to others. A Master Trainer Trainer is a step up—a trainer of Master Trainers. In a past life, I was a trainer of skilled swimmers who were certified to train other swim instructors and lifeguards. It was fun and sobering work. Lives could be at stake depending on the skills applied in times of crisis.

Perhaps you have led a confirmation class or church school class for children or adults. When you do so, you are a shepherd who shepherds others. You help lay and maintain a firm foundation in faith so that when conflicts arise and life's crises happen, children of God of any age can find their way back to a place of security. You become the Master's trainers.



Triune God, lead me to be a disciple who gathers and comforts and leads others to you, one who works as your partner in peace and reconciliation. Amen.

Sarah Erickson, Stone Mountain, Georgia

WEDNESDAY, JULY 14, 2021

COVENANT PROMISES

PSALM 23

Dwelling Places

*And I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.*

Psalm 23:6b

Today is Bastille Day, when revolutionaries stormed the notorious fortress and prison, ushering in the French Revolution. The Bastille protected Paris from military attack and political dissidents; it was neither peaceful nor safe.

Compare the image of an ancient prison fortress designed to protect corrupt political regimes with the comforting images conveyed by Psalm 23. Whether you know it by heart in the King James Version or as it reads in more contemporary translations, the psalm clearly reminds us that God is with us and that we can entrust our faith in all God's promises, now and forever.

When I think of the French Revolution, the World Wars, our history of racial and economic injustices, and the disruptive divisiveness of the 2020 election cycle, I think of Psalm 146:3: "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help." Psalm 23 assures me that I cannot go wrong when I trust in God's abundance and mercy.



Gracious, loving God, your steadfast love and overflowing mercy are almost too much for me to imagine. Thank you for shepherding me through all the days of my life. Amen.

Sarah Erickson, Stone Mountain, Georgia

COVENANT PROMISES

EPHESIANS 2:11–22

The Church Is the People

. . . in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Ephesians 2:22

During the long months when congregations held worship online to avoid unsafe mass gatherings, we heard many reminders that the church is not about a building but its people. This truism also comes to mind as we reflect on this passage from Ephesians, with its expressions of what it means to be members of the household of God.

The letter to the Ephesians says much about a faith community always under construction, a push-and-pull dynamic between those who grew up in the church and those who grew up outside of it. But we are given a vision of a church beyond factions, in which Christ “has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us . . . that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two” (vv. 14–15). Through unity in the Spirit in the bonds of Christ, we form a community that is not contained in buildings—especially during a pandemic—one unified, spiritual community that is a dwelling place for God.



Lord, you are our dwelling place. Make us a dwelling place for you. Amen.

Sarah Erickson, Stone Mountain, Georgia

FRIDAY, JULY 16, 2021

COVENANT PROMISES

MARK 6:30–34

Pass It On

... he began to teach them many things.

Mark 6:34b

Imagine the scene before you: Jesus receiving a report from those he had sent to teach and then inviting them to a time of Sabbath, to recharge for what comes next. Ultimately, their retreat is interrupted by crowds hungry for the good news from the Good Shepherd. And Jesus does not disappoint them.

Jesus was a master teacher, one who taught those who would in turn teach others, and one who taught new disciples who yearned to learn straight from Jesus himself. Teaching is one of our primary calls as disciples. How else will others learn the stories and the lessons of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation? How will we learn them by heart if we don't take time to get away to sit with them, to put them into practice, and to share them in community?

Practice balance in your life of discipleship. You can't keep going without a time to refresh and recharge. And yet, sometimes plans are interrupted when those yearning for the good news need to hear it from you.



Great teacher, make me a teacher, too, so that I may share the good news by word and deed. Amen.

Sarah Erickson, Stone Mountain, Georgia

COVENANT PROMISES

MARK 6:53–56

Faith and Healing

When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him . . . and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Mark 6:54, 56b

Jesus and the disciples are once again preceded by their reputation. Crowds gather, attesting to the incredible successes of Jesus' healing ministry.

As I write this, I'm looking forward to a twenty-first-century miracle of sorts: my first COVID-19 vaccination. I believe that, with more vaccinations and better compliance with CDC guidelines, we'll all be able to gather with family and friends sooner rather than later. I have faith in the scientists behind the treatment and prevention of the spread of this coronavirus; I am confident that their abilities will help us to heal.

I'm also thinking about what it means to beg to be healed. Jesus is our great physician. I am convinced that miraculous healings of body, mind, and spirit occur. What part does our faith—in God, in the gifts of scientists and doctors—play in bringing this healing about?

Great physician, thank you for healing of all kinds, and for the gifts of those you send among us to heal us. Amen.

Sarah Erickson, Stone Mountain, Georgia

SUNDAY, JULY 18, 2021

COVENANT CHALLENGES

2 SAMUEL 11:1–15

The Next Right Thing

But Uriah slept at the entrance of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house.

2 Samuel 11:9

What oaths do we make that shape our behavior? Some make scout promises, follow laws, pledge to uphold professional standards, or swear to protect and defend the Constitution. Wedding vows and baptismal vows are recited and witnessed many times during a lifetime.

Keeping our word is as simple and as complicated as doing the next right thing. In times of crisis or complacency, we may become convinced that an exception won't hurt *this one time*. The chinks in our moral armor begin to show.

I think about Uriah upholding his code of conduct as a soldier and of David breaking the Ten Commandments. I think of John Calvin's focus on the Word as the thread that can guide us through life. I think about the times when I have bent the rules and the problems that ensued. When I face the consequences, I am reminded that God's forgiveness is already there. I can revisit my commitment to hold fast to that thread of truth that leads to the next right thing.



*God of justice, lead me to do the next right thing.
When I fail, forgive me and set me straight. Amen.*

Sarah Erickson, Stone Mountain, Georgia

COVENANT CHALLENGES

PSALM 14

If Fools and Folly Rule the World

*The LORD looks down from heaven on humankind
to see if there are any who are wise,
who seek after God.*

Psalm 14:2

Ordinarily I am a glass-half-full person, a cockeyed optimist, and all that, with a dash of pragmatism thrown in the mix for balance. A favorite quotation, variously attributed, illustrates this point: “If fools and folly rule the world, the end of humankind in our time may come as a rude shock but no longer a complete surprise.” Sin and salvation go hand in hand.

The psalmist seems to speak to both sides of this eternal coin. On one hand, moral failure to live faithfully under God’s sovereignty is sheer folly, and to say God’s help is meaningless is foolish. On the other hand, the psalmist acknowledges what they see plainly: corruption exists, and it seems that evildoers outnumber the righteous.

It’s not a simple question of which side you are on. We see human depravity at work in the world. We also see good works being done on behalf of the poor and marginalized. We hope for God’s restoration of the covenant people. We are like the psalmist.

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*Deliver us, God, and restore the fortunes of everyone
in your good creation. Amen.*

Sarah Erickson, Stone Mountain, Georgia

TUESDAY, JULY 20, 2021

COVENANT CHALLENGES

2 KINGS 4:42–44

Trust

*He set it before them, they ate, and had some left,
according to the word of the LORD.*

2 Kings 4:44

Trust issues: many of us have them with businesses or politicians, health care and insurance providers, educational systems, and one another. Trust or lack thereof is one of the great themes of literature and the arts. The sixty-six books of the Bible address it from beginning to end.

Take a few minutes and read all of 2 Kings 4. It describes a series of remarkable miracles performed by Elisha, with God's help. Just as it was with Elijah, his credibility as a prophet was questioned until he had proven himself. Because Elisha trusted in the word of the Lord, the people began to trust Elisha.

Unfortunately, human beings will disappoint us, falling far short of God's love and desire for justice for the oppressed, the widow and orphan, the stranger, and those who go to bed with empty bellies. God's standards are hard to meet, and more than one politician has fallen from grace despite attempts to uphold those standards. Put first your trust in God, and seek those whose actions affirm that trust. Follow them.



*Sovereign God, I place my trust in you and in those who
seek to do your will and work in the world. Amen.*

Sarah Erickson, Stone Mountain, Georgia

COVENANT CHALLENGES

PSALM 145:10–18

Faithful in All

*The LORD is faithful in all his words,
and gracious in all his deeds.*

Psalm 145:13b

Take a quick read or two through these nine verses and—as time allows—the entire psalm. Did you notice the number of times the words *all* and *every* (or *they* and *them*, referring to those masses) occur? By my count, at least sixteen times between verses 10 and 18. My Old Testament professor, Walter Brueggemann, told us to pay attention to the repetition of words, to circle and connect them as a way of exploring the lessons they hold.

It is clear that the scope of God's care extends beyond our wildest dreams, encompassing everything God says and does, all lands and creatures, from great to small. God's covenant care is just and kind, gracious, everlasting, and generous. Not one thing is beyond God's care, including those who are falling or bowed down, the often overlooked and underrepresented. They, too, are mentioned for good reason.



*Lord, you heed the calls of all who love you, all
who cry to you, all who are in your everlasting care.
Thank you for drawing near to us when we most
need you. Amen.*

Sarah Erickson, Stone Mountain, Georgia

COVENANT CHALLENGES

EPHESIANS 3:14–21

Core Strength

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit.

Ephesians 3:16

About a month into the pandemic, I put one of my 2020 intentions into practice: doing planks, crunches, weightlifting, and other exercises to build my core strength. Within weeks, I began to feel a difference. I was encouraged. I kept at it!

The Letter to the Ephesians focuses on “building up the body of Christ” (4:12). The ending of chapter 3 speaks to the importance of the core strength of our faith. When we are strong in our inward being, faithful hearts beating to the power of the Spirit, the writer says we will be “rooted and grounded in love” (v. 17). We shall not be moved. From that position of strength, with God’s help, we can do far more than we can do on our own, things beyond our limited imaginations.

With a strong core faith, it is easier to resist the temptations that would see us full of the devil instead of “all the fullness of God” (v. 19).



To God, who by the power at work in us is able to accomplish more than we can ask for or imagine, we give thanks for the encouragement to keep going. Amen.

Sarah Erickson, Stone Mountain, Georgia

COVENANT CHALLENGES

JOHN 6:1–15

Heed the Sign

When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”

John 6:14

At the Sea of Galilee, I was surprised to see a warning sign at the shoreline parking lot. The area is prone to sudden storms, and vicious waves are known to sweep unsuspecting vehicles—and their occupants—into the sea. It was hard to miss the signs. Yet, our guide told us, every so often, a storm would boil up and swamp a car or two.

In the feeding of the five thousand, we witness another impossible-to-miss sign of Jesus’ divine mission and authority. “Oh, yes,” I hear them murmur, “It *must* be *him*.” So intent are they on this proof of divine power, they even want to make him king by force! Jesus, of course, will have none of it. The crowds have seen the sign and yet missed the fullness of his mission.

How can we take the signs of Jesus’ teaching beyond face value? How do we heed their deeper meaning and calls to discipleship?



Jesus, we see signs of your abundant mercy and are afraid to share. Open our hearts and hands to share the signs of your generous love with all. Amen.

Sarah Erickson, Stone Mountain, Georgia

SATURDAY, JULY 24, 2021

COVENANT CHALLENGES

JOHN 6:16–21

I Am

But he said to them, “It is I; do not be afraid.”

John 6:20

Stretching bread and fish to feed a multitude, with leftovers, and walking on water during a storm—these are the stories of hymns and songs and Sunday school lessons, of children’s church musicals and commentaries and sermons through the ages.

Why are we still so afraid to confront Jesus as he really, truly is? Why are we shaken to our core, time and again, when storms come and we seek Jesus and find him there proclaiming, “It is I. Fear not”?

It may be easy to “keep on the sunny side” when things are going our way. At those times, it is easy to keep faith in a Jesus who we imagine but rarely see up close and personal. Especially in the storms, when we feel separated from God by what we have done or left undone, we see ourselves as unworthy. Jesus never sees us that way. He is always approaching, beckoning, inviting us, saying, “I am here. All is well.”



Jesus, even in the storm, you come to us, showing us the depth of your care, forgiveness, and love. Thank you. Amen.

Sarah Erickson, Stone Mountain, Georgia

GOD'S STEADFAST LOVE

2 SAMUEL 11:26–12:13

God Acts!

David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." Nathan said to David "Now the LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die."

2 Samuel 12:13

After hearing a challenging and demanding sermon, we remark "it would have been so good if only Larry or Lorraine had been present!" We deflect the incoming missile of truth to someone else. David declares that the rich man ought to be punished for his lack of pity. Is it not David who is to be punished for his lack of pity? Nathan says to David, "You are the man." Nathan continues to list God's blessings, which David has abused in his desire to have more, no matter the compromise of truth, grace, love, or compassion.

The power of truth when truth speaks to power can be life transforming. David accepts this truth and responds taking full responsibility, saying, "I have sinned against the Lord." His confession turns to commitment; his sin is banished, and God's gift is a second chance. Keep your ears open to Nathan's words of truth. Keep your eyes open; in David we can catch glimpses of ourselves. Keep your heart open, and God will find a way in.

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Lord help me be as bold as David in acknowledging that "I have sinned against the Lord." Amen.

Edward J. Thompson, Louisville, Kentucky

MONDAY, JULY 26, 2021

GOD'S STEADFAST LOVE

PSALM 51:1–12

God Renews!

*Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love.*

Psalm 51:1

In worship, the prayer of confession places us before God, seeking God's mercy and love. We confess that we have been wrong: we have neither acted as we should nor according to the will of God. Psalm 51 is an honest confession, ascribed to David when he was confronted by the prophet Nathan. Yesterday we noted that David admitted his errors, saying "I have sinned." Today we hear his confession and plea that God create in him a clean heart and a new and right spirit.

Why do we have so much trouble saying sorry? Why are we so slow to take responsibility for our mistakes and misdeeds? Let us put away our self-deception and our selfish pride, which tricks and teases us into believing that we can't possibly be wrong. Humility is too often absent in our push-and-pull world of more. We need to learn to own our mistakes and become new people who are able to say sorry.



Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Amen.

Edward J. Thompson, Louisville, Kentucky

GOD'S STEADFAST LOVE

EXODUS 16:2-4, 9-15

God Provides!

I have heard the complaining of the Israelites.

Exodus 16:12

In Scotland, travel by commuter train was convenient and dependable. I always tried to find a seat facing the direction of travel! If you did not find a seat facing the direction of travel, the whole journey was spent looking back.

The Israelites, finding the way forward full of wilderness and difficulty, yearned for what once was. They would have returned quickly to what was, giving up on what might be, choosing a cautious life rather than a committed life to God's possibility. Hearing their complaining and showing steadfast mercy and grace, God provided not what they wanted but what they needed. God provided not in abundance but enough. God's plan was for everyone to have enough—not more or less, but enough. There was no place for hoarding. Perhaps we need to face the direction of travel, looking with hope and joy into God's future and our own. And as we travel, let us not clutch for more but trust in God's steadfast mercy and grace.



Lead me in your way, O Lord, and teach me to trust your mercy and grace. Amen.

Edward J. Thompson, Louisville, Kentucky

GOD'S STEADFAST LOVE

EPHESIANS 4:1–13

God Calls!

Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.

Ephesians 4:1

I have fond childhood memories of enjoying the special treat of a small box of licorice allsorts. That mixture of licorice, sugar, coconut, and aniseed jelly, pressed together in different shapes and colors, was such a treat.

The apostle Paul was quick to recognize that the community of faith was made up of many different people with different gifts and strengths, and every one of them was needed to bring alive the witness of Christ. Paul celebrated difference in the search for unity in the one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. Paul reminds us that we are called by God. God uses all sorts to make a new world. Paul often gives us lists, and today is no exception. He lists humility, gentleness, and patience as characteristics we should embody in living our calling from God. There must be a good and godly measure of humility, gentleness, and patience pressed together in each and every one of us. What a treat!



Lord God, I hear your call to follow. Equip me for this new life in Christ. Amen.

Edward J. Thompson, Louisville, Kentucky

GOD'S STEADFAST LOVE

EPHESIANS 4:14–16

God Equips!

The whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament.

Ephesians 4:16

I have been fortunate to have had wonderful family doctors in the places I have lived. General practitioners have the skill, wisdom, and knowledge to look on me as a whole person and treat me as such. Granted, specialists come into their own when they are needed, and I am grateful for their expertise. However, for everyday well-being, it is good to have someone looking at me from head to toe.

Paul is our spiritual GP, describing how every ligament is vital to the functioning of the body. Paul talks about the gifts that God gives to the community—apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers—all to equip and build up the body of Christ. Today we understand better than ever the need to have a balanced diet to enable good health. And the church is in need of a balanced diet to grow in the love and purposes of God. Give thanks for the rich variety of gifts as you see them in your own community of faith. In unity, not uniformity, may they equip the saints for ministry.



Lord God, help me to play my part in the community of faith. Amen.

Edward J. Thompson, Louisville, Kentucky

FRIDAY, JULY 30, 2021

GOD'S STEADFAST LOVE

JOHN 6:24–29

God Sends!

They themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

John 6:24

I'm often told I'm not good at looking for things even if they are right under my nose! The same might be said of us all, as so much seems to go unnoticed. We need to try harder to really see what is there. Let's be honest. We don't often go looking for Jesus; we don't expect to find him in the here and now.

Imagine if we looked with expectation. Might we look in the food pantry, under the overpass, in the corridors of the city council, or in the staff room of the school? If we look for Jesus in these places, we might find him and also find a call to care for our neighbor, to feed the hungry, and to provide shelter to the homeless. To find Jesus in the places of power and education would mean a whole new way of governance and nurture. A whole new way of looking might lead to a whole new way of living. I need to look harder, and I hope you will too.



Lord, with patience and persistence, help me to look for you. Amen.

Edward J. Thompson, Louisville, Kentucky

GOD'S STEADFAST LOVE

JOHN 6:30–35

God Sustains!

“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

John 6:35

These words of promise usher us into the very presence of the majesty and mystery of holy God. This promise coming from the lips of Jesus leaves us speechless but not silent; these words cause us to be still but not frozen.

Jesus speaks here about life the right way up, and in this promise we can cope with the myriad challenges and competing priorities of life. In the hustle and bustle of life, we need moments of recalibration and realignment. Otherwise we drift far from where we ought to be. It is good to be reminded that Jesus stands at the very core of our being, offering us what is essential for a life that is in tune with the music of the gospels. Bread and water are the very essentials for life. Take a moment to be both silent and still and to taste this promise in all its richness. Allow these words of promise to surround and sustain you in good times and in bad, in sunshine and in rain, in life and in death.



Lord, give me hunger and thirst for your mercy and your grace. Amen.

Edward J. Thompson, Louisville, Kentucky