

LIFE IS COMPLICATED

SCRIPTURE: PSALM 149

I Love Humanity; It's People I Can't Stand.

*For the LORD takes pleasure in his people;
he adorns the humble with victory.*

Psalm 149:4

Do you take pleasure in “your” people? Your friends and family, your neighbors and coworkers, or the people you sit beside in church? It’s an honest question, because people are complex creatures and groups of them (as in a church) are even more so, and complexity inevitably makes things a bit more difficult. Pleasure can be elusive when we discover disappointment, shortcomings, and betrayals where we hoped to find truth, strength, and loyalty. It can be easy to become bitter.

I often wonder if God occasionally struggles with our frailties. Does God sometimes feel bitter about our flawed natures? Yet, as the psalmist says, God takes pleasure in us, despite—or maybe because of—our imperfections. We cannot be perfect; that is beyond our grasp and is not really our task. But honest and insightful humility can lead us closer to that perfection when we understand and accept our true, God-given humanity, frailties and all. And that is indeed a victory.



*God, grant me the serenity to accept my own limitations,
just as in your limitless love, you accept me. Amen.*

Daniel Benson, Toronto, Ontario

LIFE IS COMPLICATED

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 18:15–20

What If It's Just Me by Myself?

*“For where two or three are gathered in my name,
I am there among them.”*

Matthew 18:20

Interestingly, Jesus seems to suggest that a minimum attendance for him to show up is two or three. What about one? Doesn't an individual alone merit Jesus' presence? I can almost hear him say, “Sorry, I need a bigger crowd,” as I stand by myself, inviting him in. Yet I know that I'm fully aware of Jesus' presence in my life when I am alone, as well as when I'm with others. So what gives?

Perhaps Jesus is emphasizing the importance of being with others in community and the fact that being in relationship is essential to our faith. Of course, we can feel God's presence and Jesus' accompaniment in solitude and in prayer. But faith is nourished, strengthened, and honed when we walk and talk with others. They will encourage and challenge us to sing new songs, see God afresh, and discover paths of discipleship we may never have thought possible by ourselves. And then we will be truly aware of Jesus among us.



*Whether I am alone, in a small circle of friends, or in
a crowd, let me be always mindful of your presence,
O God. Amen.*

Daniel Benson, Toronto, Ontario

LIFE IS COMPLICATED

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 18:15–20

Do as I Do, Not as I Say

“If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

Matthew 18:17

Jesus invokes his strongest condemnation on offenders of the church: treat them as Gentiles and tax collectors. They were the worst of the worst in Jesus’ time—sinners and traitors to be shunned at every turn, the bottom of the heap. Yet how many times is Jesus himself criticized by the religious authorities (and the “nice people” in town) for fraternizing and even dining with sinners and tax collectors?

So do we do as Jesus seems to say, or do we do as Jesus himself does? Perhaps it’s both. Maybe Jesus is telling us the way to treat the offender is in fact by embracing them even more closely, as he does. For if we shun the lost, we’ll never have the chance to fix what went wrong. But if we, as Jesus does, embrace even those who seem impossibly lost, we may be able to love them back into the fold. Because that’s what Jesus would do.



Help me to look past the faults and offenses of others, as you, dear God, look past mine so that we all may be seen as your beloved but imperfect children. Amen.

Daniel Benson, Toronto, Ontario

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 2020

LIFE IS COMPLICATED

SCRIPTURE: ROMANS 13:8–14

In the Blink of an Eye

For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.

Romans 13:11b–12

My car's side-view mirror, probably like yours, says, "Objects may be closer than they appear." I think of that warning whenever I read what Paul wrote to the church in Rome, feeling the end was nigh and the night far gone and the day near. Yet here we are some two thousand years later, still waiting and wondering. Did someone count wrong or lose their calendar? Or is time so fluid that a couple of millennia make no difference? Certainly, in God's time, that's the blink of an eye.

So we wait, pray, and work for God's kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven. That requires patience, confidence, and faith. It also requires caution, just as the warning on our side-view mirror advises. That mirror shows us more than just what's behind us; it tells us what's in our blind spots and whether it might be dangerous. It reminds us, like Paul, to be mindful of the present because we don't always know what might be nearer than we think.



In my mindfulness of the present, O God, lead me into the nearness of your presence. Amen.

Daniel Benson, Toronto, Ontario

LIFE IS COMPLICATED

SCRIPTURE: ROMANS 13:8–14

Love My Neighbor? Seriously??

Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Romans 13:10

But I really, really don't like my neighbor! So how am I supposed to love them? Let's be honest: some people are quite unlovable, so how the heck do I love them when I can't bring myself to even liking them? Yet we are called to love not only our neighbors but also our enemies, and we must turn the other cheek! This is a tough one.

And is it enough to simply do no wrong to them? That seems sort of a minimalist approach. Is not actively harming someone the same thing as actively loving them? Jesus encourages us—commands us, really—to understand how completely the idea of love overturns the normal way of the world. All aspects of the law are fulfilled by love. No one is so far gone, so beyond redemption, that love cannot redeem them; no relationship is so broken that love cannot mend it. So even if you really, really don't like your neighbor, love has the possibility of redeeming them. And you.



Loving God, lead me into loving others as you love me. Amen.

Daniel Benson, Toronto, Ontario

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 2020

GROWING A PEOPLE OF GOD

SCRIPTURE: EXODUS 14:19–21

Taking the First Step

The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night.

Exodus 14:21b

The Hebrew slaves hurried from their homes only to find themselves smack up against the Red Sea with the Egyptian army in hot pursuit. The cloud that assured them of God's presence had left the front of the band of travelers and was now behind it.

What did this mean? The Hebrews weren't at all sure. They complained to Moses, asking whether he had brought them out of slavery to die and claiming that they were better off in Egypt. Moses tried to assure them with "Do not be afraid, stand firm . . . keep still" (vv. 13, 14). But now the Egyptians could be seen approaching and God seemed far away.

Then the strong east wind blew and blew, creating a dry pathway through the water for them to walk safely across. Who was brave or trusting enough to take that first step, to begin the long journey that was ahead of them, the exodus that would form them as God's people?



God of the universe, I pray for complete trust in you that pushes me to take the first step. Amen.

Carol A. Wehrheim, Skillman, New Jersey

GROWING A PEOPLE OF GOD

SCRIPTURE: EXODUS 14:22–31

Hearing the Whole Story

Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians.

Exodus 14:31a

It was all over. The Israelites had safely crossed the Red Sea. But the parted waters came back together when the Egyptian army tried to cross. But before the narrator tells of the “great work that the LORD did,” we learn that the Israelites saw all the Egyptians dead on the shore. Why include this sentence? Did God want them to see that their enemy had been destroyed and that they were safe? Or did God want them to see the consequences of their freedom, that God had rescued them at the cost of the loss of many lives?

As we read this passage, we might ask ourselves how we include the story of the other, the enemy, or the losers when we remember the past. Without the inclusion of those stories, our formation as God’s people is not complete.



God, open our eyes, ears, and hearts to the stories that have been ignored or hidden by conquerors throughout history. Amen.

Carol A. Wehrheim, Skillman, New Jersey

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 2020

GROWING A PEOPLE OF GOD

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 18:21–22

Seventy-Seven Times

“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?”

Matthew 18:21

At the beginning of Matthew 18, Jesus instructs his followers about life together and about caring for the little ones, the most vulnerable in the community. But he also sets these vulnerable ones forth as an example of faithfulness.

Now Peter wonders just how much forgiveness should be offered. One suspects that he has a situation in mind. The same question may be rolling around in yours. Is forgiving someone always the best move? Isn't there a limit to how often you can really forgive the same person? What happens when you can't forgive someone or someone won't forgive you?

In his initial answer, Jesus doesn't set any limits to how often. The number he gives is huge, whether the Greek is translated as seventy-seven times or seventy times seven. Forgiveness, while not unique to the Christian faith, is critical to the life of the church and to our lives as families and communities outside the church. How do we look on forgiveness based on Jesus' answer?

—

God of love, lead me to an understanding of forgiveness that seeks the best for the one I am forgiving and for me. Amen.

Carol A. Wehrheim, Skillman, New Jersey

GROWING A PEOPLE OF GOD

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 18:23–32

The Wideness of God's Mercy

*When his fellow slaves saw what had happened,
they were greatly distressed.*

Matthew 18:31a

The parable Jesus told to explain his answer about forgiveness is an exaggeration. No slave could possibly pay back what the first slave owed his master. Clearly Jesus used this huge number to extend his answer to Peter. Still the master forgave the debt, totally, choosing not to sell everything the slave had, including his family. When other slaves saw that same slave refuse forgiveness for a much smaller sum, they could not hold back. This unwillingness to forgive as he was forgiven had broken the community. The trust necessary to bind a group together can no longer include the first slave.

The exaggerated debt the first slave owed reminds us of the mercy of God, which should be overwhelming to us, as overwhelming as the sum forgiven by the master. Once we recognize the extent of God's mercy, we can only attempt to show some portion of that mercy to others. How then do we understand forgiveness in our own lives? What supports the forgiveness we offer to others?



*God of overwhelming mercy and forgiveness, open
our hearts to offer that forgiveness to others. Amen.*

Carol A. Wehrheim, Skillman, New Jersey

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2020

GROWING A PEOPLE OF GOD

SCRIPTURE: ROMANS 14:1–12

Welcome Everyone

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.

Romans 14:1

Paul has not been to Rome, but he has heard about problems in the Christian community there. He talks about the factions as weak or strong, not right or wrong. The weak are those who believe these restrictions are necessary for them to be faithful to God; the strong do not. Reading this passage carefully, you discover that Paul doesn't take sides, but he urges all the people to be tolerant of what the other side finds necessary to be faithful. Only in this way will the church, the community of faith, be a united rather than a fractured body of Christ.

In verse 10, Paul asks his readers, "Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?" The quarreling in Rome and in many congregations today is about how we live as God's people from day to day. We would do well to heed Paul's words that end this passage: "So then, each of us will be accountable to God" (v. 12).



God of mercy and love, remind us, hourly if necessary, that your love and mercy cover everyone. Amen.

Carol A. Wehrheim, Skillman, New Jersey

GROWING A PEOPLE OF GOD

SCRIPTURE: PSALM 114

Memories Make the Community

When Israel went out from Egypt . . .

Psalm 114:1a

An important part of being God's people, a community of faith, is the communal memories, going all the way back to the foundational stories of our faith. Psalm 114 provided that remembering, an opportunity to recall how God formed this people as they journeyed through the exodus and settled in a new land. In that story, we also paused to consider how the story sounds to those who lost the battle, particularly the Egyptians. We cannot ignore God's concern for all people.

Psalm 114 is the second of the Hallel Psalms (113–118) that were sung at the joyful festivals and at Passover. Verses 1 and 2 acknowledge God's role in bringing God's people out of slavery and forming them as a people of God. The tone is exuberant and almost has you marching as you read it. What a pleasant way to prepare to gather with God's people to worship the Lord on the Sabbath! What faith memories do you bring?



God of the exodus, we praise your holy name and give thanks for all that you have done and continue to do for your people and your creation. Amen.

Carol A. Wehrheim, Skillman, New Jersey

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2020

GROWING A PEOPLE OF GOD

SCRIPTURE: PSALM 114

Trembling Together

*Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the LORD . . .
who turns the rock into a pool of water.*

Psalm 114:7a, 8a

Psalm 114 describes the earth itself responding to God's redemptive action, with seas fleeing and mountains skipping. The song praises God as so powerful and tremendous that no part of creation can escape noticing and reacting. If even geographic features are in awe of God, how much more should we be! This image invites us to see ourselves as part of God's created order, to share in the trembling of all the earth at the presence of God.

Nearly every translation uses the word *tremble*. Trembling can indicate fear, but it can also suggest excitement or great joy. The book of Psalms includes so many experiences and expressions of human interaction with God, from lament to celebration and from very personal to broadly communal, and—as we see in Psalm 114—even beyond humankind. As Sunday approaches, take a moment to reflect on the emotions and sensations present in relationship to God as an individual, as a part of your community or congregation, and as a small piece in God's vast creation.



*God of mercy, I pray that my heart and soul will be
open and responsive to your work in the world. Amen.*

Carol A. Wehrheim, Skillman, New Jersey

REVELATIONS OF GOD'S GLORY

SCRIPTURE: HEBREWS 11:23–29

God's Glory Revealed on the Side of the Oppressed

He considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward.

Hebrews 11:26

In his 1986 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel said, “We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.”*

Early on, Moses was a poster child for silence in the face of injustice. Even when God came to him in a burning bush, he argued that he wasn't a good speaker and asked that God send someone else (Exod. 4:10–13). Yet we now view Moses as a pillar of faith, the one God used to free God's people. Moses chose to speak out on the side of the oppressed. It was there that he found God's glory revealed. If we are to embrace the promises God has for this world, we must take sides. Forfeiting our comfort in favor of speaking out for justice lets us discover God's glory in the presence of those most in need.



Give us the courage to stand on the side of the oppressed, trusting that you are there. Amen.

Kendra Buckwalter Smith, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

*Elie Wiesel, “Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech” (Nobel Prize presentation, Oslo, Norway, December 10, 1986), <https://eliewiesel.foundation.org/elie-wiesel/nobelprizespeech/>.

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 14, 2020

REVELATIONS OF GOD'S GLORY

SCRIPTURE: PSALM 77

When God's Glory Goes Unseen

*Your way was through the sea,
your path, through the mighty waters;
yet your footprints were unseen.*

Psalm 77:19

How many times have you lied awake at night worrying about what will be? So often, uncertainty and fear overcome us, and God seems silent.

Not long after the end of World War II, great words of faith were found scrawled on the stone wall of a cellar in Germany where Jews once hid from Nazi torment. The inscription read: "I believe in the sun even when it's not shining. I believe in love even when I don't feel it. I believe in God even when He is silent."*

In days of trouble, we might wonder with the psalmist if God has forgotten us, forgotten to be gracious. But when the flood waters of despair overwhelm us and wash away evidence of God's footsteps, our faith assures us that God is still present. For we remember when God carried us through the baptismal waters of chaos and death and raised us to new life in Christ.



*When your footsteps are hidden from our view, O
Lord, may we trust that you are still at work. Amen.*

Kendra Buckwalter Smith, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

*"I Believe," in *The Judaic Tradition*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (Springfield, NJ: Behrman House, 1969), 623.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2020

REVELATIONS OF GOD'S GLORY

SCRIPTURE: EXODUS 16:2–15

God's Glory Revealed in the Wilderness

“In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD.”

Exodus 16:6b–7a

God never just delivers us *from* something but also *to* something. God delivered the Israelites from bondage in Egypt and to the freedom of the land promised to Abraham. But there was some reframing to do before they would be ready for the fulfillment of this promise. There was a long, hard time spent in the wilderness. It's in the wilderness that we learn how to look to God, to depend on God, and to give up our own illusions that we can somehow make a way for ourselves.

In life's wilderness places of loss or change, God hears our cries. God provides for our needs and invites us to draw close. When we do, our faces are turned from the false security of the world and toward the gracious works of God. We discover God's glory guiding us through the wilderness and to our promised future.



God of grace, may we find your glory revealed even in the wilderness places of our lives. For it is there that we learn to trust in you alone. Amen.

Kendra Buckwalter Smith, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

REVELATIONS OF GOD'S GLORY
SCRIPTURE: PSALM 105:1–6, 37–45

God's Glory Revealed through the Past and for the Future

*O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples.
Sing to him, sing praises to him;
tell of all his wonderful works.*

Psalm 105:1–2

In exile, the Israelites had lost everything, including the land God had promised to them. Rather than looking at their misfortune, the psalmist encourages them to look to God's great faithfulness. When we remember God's great wonders, grace received turns to praise given.

This historical psalm of praise recounts Israel's story, but only selectively. Here, the psalmist does not recount Israel's unfaithful grumbling in the wilderness but instead points to concrete examples of God's great works. This reminds the Israelites—and us—that it is not by our own work that we find deliverance. The psalmist points us to God's past faithfulness so that we might praise God in the present and trust God for the future. Equipped with such trust, we are called to join in God's witness to all people.



*All praise to you, almighty God, for you have done
wondrous things. Remembering your good works, may
we entrust our future to you and may we find our voice
in the proclamation of your great glory. Amen.*

Kendra Buckwalter Smith, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

REVELATIONS OF GOD'S GLORY

SCRIPTURE: PHILIPPIANS 1:21–30

Christ Revealed in Suffering

For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well.

Philippians 1:29

We know that God looks after God's people. Yet such care is not characterized by saving us from all hardship and by blessing us with prosperity, health, or good fortune. In fact, as we saw with the Israelites, God's blessing sometimes sends us into wilderness places of struggle and uncertainty.

Paul writes to the Philippians from prison, encouraging them to see Christ in the midst of suffering and persecution. For the hope of the Gospel is that no matter what, God is with us. As God sent bread from heaven in the wilderness, so was Christ sent into the midst of even our most challenging experiences. With this assurance, Paul can expect deliverance for himself and for the Philippians—not an escape from life's trials, but the courage to endure them in all faith and truth. In all circumstances, may we confidently expect to find Christ sharing them along with us.



Heavenly Parent, thank you for sending your Son, Jesus Christ. As we live in him, may we find all suffering transformed into expressions of his glory. Amen.

Kendra Buckwalter Smith, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 2020

REVELATIONS OF GOD'S GLORY

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 20:1–15

God's Glory Revealed in Unexpected Economics

"I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

Matthew 20:14b–15

God's grace never seems to align with our worldly understanding of economics. We love God's grace when we're the recipients. We can even appreciate grace when others are the recipients. But when we find that the grace given to another equates to that which our hard work has earned, we begin to object. That's when this whole grace thing begins to seem pretty unfair and when we find ourselves arguing for a quid-pro-quo economy in which we know what we deserve and what to expect.

But that's the beauty of grace: grace can never be deserved or expected, for it is a gift. And a gift can only be freely given and freely received. With grace, we need not be envious of what others receive. God's grace given to others never diminishes what we receive. For God's grace is more than enough for you and for me.

When life seems unfair, help us not to compare ourselves with others but to simply delight in and give thanks for your grace, freely offered to all. Amen.

Kendra Buckwalter Smith, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 2020

REVELATIONS OF GOD'S GLORY
SCRIPTURE: 2 CORINTHIANS 13:5–10

Glory of God in Jesus Christ Revealed in You

Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?

2 Corinthians 13:5b

We have found God's glory revealed in some unexpected places this week—on the side of the oppressed, in the wilderness, in suffering. The Letter to the Corinthians reminds us that God's glory is closer than we could ever imagine, for Christ is in us. With every revelation of God's glory, we find a calling to a new way of life. Carrying Christ within us means that in all we do, we have the opportunity to be ambassadors for God's glorious purposes in this world.

The great comfort of God's presence in our own lives calls us to point to God's presence in the lives of others. This is why we tell one another of all the big and small ways we find God at work in our lives. Because there will always be someone from whom God's footsteps are hidden. There will always be someone struggling to find God in the wilderness. To them and to all, let us proclaim the gospel of our glorious God.



Help us to live according to your truth, doing what is right and seeking perfection as we proclaim your glory to one another. Amen.

Kendra Buckwalter Smith, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2020

TRUST AND OBEY

SCRIPTURE: EXODUS 17:1-7

God Is with Us Always

I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb.

Exodus 17:6

The Israelites have come out of Egypt, but now there is an acute problem: no water to drink. They quarrel with Moses and threaten to stone him. Moses laments: Why do the people quarrel with him, and why do the people test the Lord? The reality of God is not dependent on human prosperity. Nevertheless, God provides a wonder. The Lord directs Moses to take the elders ahead to a rock at Horeb and to strike that rock with the staff that he used to strike the Nile. Then water will come out of it for the people to drink.

Moses does so. The immediate problem is solved.

Equally important, God is seen as affirming Moses's leadership. Water symbolizes life, and only God can give the resources for life. God chooses to do so through the work of Moses.

We often experience grave problems and worry about how we are going to survive. The account of Moses bringing forth water from the rock at Horeb tells us that God is with us always.



*Lord, grant us the wisdom to rely on your presence.
Amen.*

Quentin A. Holmes, Marcola, Oregon

TRUST AND OBEY

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 21:23–32

Who Gave You This Authority?

“Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?”

Matthew 21:25

Jesus has entered the temple for the last time. He is challenged by the high priests and elders, who will plot his death and soon sit in judgment of him.

The high priests ask Jesus where his authority comes from. Jesus turns the question around on them: “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” The high priests are caught in a dilemma: if they answer “from heaven,” they open up the issue of why they didn’t believe John the Baptist; if they answer “of human origin,” they will antagonize the crowd. The high priests refuse to answer, saying instead that they do not know. Their answer allows Jesus to respond in kind, making the high priest’s self-serving agenda clearly evident.

Jesus’ authority comes from God. His words and actions often confounded those in power, but even though they condemned and crucified Jesus, God triumphed through Jesus’ death and resurrection. In our hearts we know that all authority comes from God. However, we are often tempted to obey our own wishes instead of relying on God.



Lord, grant us the ability to discern your authority and rely on it. Amen.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 2020

TRUST AND OBEY

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 21:23–32

Parable of the Two Sons

“Which of the two did the will of his father?”

Matthew 21:31a

This parable is addressed to the chief priests and elders as a continuation of Jesus’ response to their challenges. A father asks his two sons to work in the vineyard. One son says he will but does not. The other son says he won’t but later does. Which is better—to profess faith with your lips and fail to live it out or to defy expectations with your faithful deeds?

The author of the Gospel of Matthew has not forgotten that the Pharisees and the Sadducees were among those who went out to hear John the Baptist. The Pharisees and the Sadducees, who were entrusted with teaching the Jewish faith as revealed in the Torah, did not accept John’s message and repent. However, tax collectors and prostitutes, who were outcasts from the Jewish community, displayed faith beyond words by repenting.

Again and again God has sent prophets. However, existing religious leaders rarely respond to them in a positive manner. Jesus’ parable reminds them that God requires deeds rather than empty words.



*Lord, grant us the wisdom to be doers of your word,
not just well-meaning talkers. Amen.*

Quentin A. Holmes, Marcola, Oregon

TRUST AND OBEY

SCRIPTURE: PHILIPPIANS 2:1–13

Our Life in Christ

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.

Philippians 2:3

Paul appeals to the Christians in Philippi to behave in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, namely to be like-minded, “having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (v. 2). This entails humility to the point of laying aside one’s own ambitions and pride in favor of the interests of others.

We are used to thinking of humility as a virtue. But this was not the case in biblical times where it was regarded as servility. Paul uses it to mean the attitude of being humble—toward God and other people. Paul urges the church to regard others as better than themselves, not as a self-abasement, but in recognition of the rights and achievements of others. This mirrors part of Jesus’ commandment to love others as you love yourself. Those who are brought low may hope for God to save them (Job 5:11; Ps. 142:6). Those who suffer for the sake of others will later be exalted. Of which Christ is the perfect example!



Lord, grant us the grace to be sincerely humble. Amen.

Quentin A. Holmes, Marcola, Oregon

TRUST AND OBEY

SCRIPTURE: PHILIPPIANS 2:1–13

The Mind of Christ

*He humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

Philippians 2:8

In this passage, Paul presents Christ as being preexistent, choosing to take human form as an act of self-emptying and being humble enough to lay aside divine glory and obedient even to the point of being crucified for our sake. Because Christ acted in this way, God has highly exalted him and given him the name that is above every other name.

Many biblical scholars point out the contrast between Adam (Genesis) and Christ (Philippians). Adam is described as the first man whose disobedience was the fall of mankind. Christ is the second Adam, an obedient and life-giving spirit. The first man is from dust; the second man is from heaven. Christ is understood to have reversed the effects of Adam's sin and death. The result of Christ's becoming man, and being obedient to the point of death, is that human beings are delivered from bondage and become the very children of God. Just as the first humans were made in the image of God, through Christ we have become images of the living God.



*Lord, help us to be obedient to your will and faithful
to your image in us. Amen.*

Quentin A. Holmes, Marcola, Oregon

TRUST AND OBEY

SCRIPTURE: PHILIPPIANS 2:1–13

Our Necessary Response

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

Philippians 2:12b

Paul urges the Philippians to live in a way appropriate to the gospel, whether he himself is present or absent. The Greek word for “presence” also has the sense of “coming.” It is not clear whether Paul is referring to his presence with them in the past or to a possible future visit.

Having described the gracious action of God in Christ in verses 6–11, Paul compels them that God’s gracious action demands a response, a “working out” of salvation in their own lives. However, this is not simply an individual matter. The “your” is plural in Greek, and the life that is to be lived is that lived in the community of believers.

Verse 13 reminds of the other side of the equation. Although Paul has urged the Philippians to work out their own salvation, it is in fact God who is at work in them, making it possible for them to will and work to God’s pleasure. The fact that God is at work in them is the basis for Paul’s confidence that his own presence or absence makes no difference in the outcome.



Lord, we desire to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. Help us to do so. Amen.

Quentin A. Holmes, Marcola, Oregon

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2020

TRUST AND OBEY

SCRIPTURE: EXODUS 17:1–7

Do All Things without Complaining

“Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?”

Exodus 17:2b

While yesterday’s reading from Philippians leaves off just before Paul’s admonition to avoid complaining (Phil. 2:14), it is clear that Paul had the Israelites’ exodus behavior on his mind. The incident we observe in Exodus 17, when the Israelites complain about lack of water and other hardships of the desert, is hardly unique. Throughout the Torah, this theme plays on repeat: the people complain, Moses expresses his frustration with them, and God ultimately provides.

When Paul praises the Philippians as “children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation” (Phil. 2:15), these words are a clear echo of Deuteronomy 32:5, in which Moses lambastes the people as “a perverse and crooked generation.” Surely the Philippians were as prone to fear and frustration as the Israelites were centuries before and we are now, centuries later. We are all tempted to complain and quarrel when life feels hard and unfair, but God calls us to have faith that transcends our current circumstances.



Lord, grant that we may hold fast to your promises, trusting you in all we do. Amen.

Quentin A. Holmes, Marcola, Oregon

GOD'S USE OF THE LAW

SCRIPTURE: EXODUS 20:12–20

Doing unto Others

“Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.”

Exodus 20:20

Today's Scripture finds us in the middle of the Ten Commandments. We've already been told to have no gods or idols before the Lord, to keep God's name holy, and to remember the Sabbath. These first commandments address our relationship with God; now we can hear about God's desires for our relationships with others. Honor our parents, and do not murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, or covet. By this time, the Israelites are nervous about any more direction coming straight from God, and they request Moses's protection.

Moses reminds them that these commandments are for their own good; God has given them to keep God's people from sinning. For fruitful relationships with others, they are to keep these commandments. This guidance was good news three thousand years ago; it is good news now also. How much healthier would our relationships with others be if we were able to follow these laws?



O God, grant us the strength to live up to your commandments so that our fellow pilgrims would better experience the abundant life you want for them. Amen.

Chip Hardwick, Evanston, Illinois

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2020

GOD'S USE OF THE LAW

SCRIPTURE: PSALM 19:7-14

More Desired than Gold

*But who can detect their errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.*

Psalm 19:12

This psalm extols God's word for its revelatory power. God's law is "perfect, reviving the soul" (v. 7). God's decrees make the simple wise, and the Lord's precepts make the heart rejoice. God's commandments are "clear, enlightening the eyes" (v. 8b), and the Lord's ordinances are "true and righteous altogether" (v. 9b). It feels a bit as if the psalmist has consulted a thesaurus to come up with as many synonyms for *law* and *good for us* as can be found.

Near the end of the passage the psalmist recognizes that it is hard for us to notice our own sin. We tend to have misplaced confidence in our own acts. We turn a blind eye to our shortcomings, and we overestimate our good deeds. Thankfully, God's word reveals our sin and describes the faithful life. It feels dangerous to ask God to reveal our sin to us, but we follow the psalmist when we ask the Spirit for the wisdom to see our lives in light of Christ's perfect holiness.



*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of
my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and
redeemer. Amen.*

Chip Hardwick, Evanston, Illinois

GOD'S USE OF THE LAW

SCRIPTURE: PHILIPPIANS 3:4B–14

Grace and Gratitude

I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

Philippians 3:8

Paul has done everything he can to show others just how impressive he is. Our passage today begins with his ticking off all the things that make his résumé the envy of all of his peers. Paul would be the student of the week, the employee of the month, and the Pharisee of the year if being righteous according to the law were the criteria for these awards.

Yet Paul himself realizes that all these accomplishments pale in comparison to knowing Jesus as his Lord. It turns out that he can't achieve his way into a right relationship with God—and neither can we. We don't need to measure up in some way so that God will finally love us. God's love for Paul, and for us, does not hinge on our behavior. It's pure, undeserved grace—a grace that leads us to gratitude and that leads us to lives that bring God glory by living up to the law. Thanks be to God!



*Christ Jesus, thank you for making us your own.
With gratitude, we strain forward to what lies ahead,
honoring you with our lives. Amen.*

Chip Hardwick, Evanston, Illinois

GOD'S USE OF THE LAW

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 21:33–41, 43

Producing the Fruits of the Kingdom

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.

Matthew 21:43

In today's passage, Jesus tells us about a landowner who leases his vineyard out to tenants. At harvest time, the landowner sends first his slaves and then his son, hoping to collect his produce. The wicked tenants kill them all, leading the landowner to retaliate in kind and then to rent the vineyard to others who will follow his expectations more closely. At the parable's close, Jesus encapsulates its meaning: "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom."

We live under grace, and yet God's expectation that our lives will reflect our faith in Christ never goes away. Faith without works is dead, and a fruitless life falls short of God's dreams for us. The Holy Spirit sanctifies us so that our lives look more and more like Jesus' life. The fruit we then bear is our offering to God at harvest time.



Gracious God, we want to bear fruit for your harvest. By the power of your Spirit, change us more and more into Jesus' likeness. Amen.

Chip Hardwick, Evanston, Illinois