

Christ has arisen, alleluia.

Rejoice and praise Him, alleluia.

For our Redeemer burst from the tomb,
Even from death dispelling its gloom.

Let us sing praise to Him with endless joy;
Death's fearful sting He has come to destroy.

Our sin forgiving, alleluia!

Jesus is living, alleluia!

Lutheran Service Book 466



And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.

Colossians 3:23-24

You Serve the Lord Christ

Here we have a summary of biblical teaching on the subject of labor, a good starting point for our Labor Day week devotions. It shapes our attitude toward our work by reminding us that we are working for the Lord.

This instruction was directed toward slaves, and it's easy to see how it would be helpful to them. They might think that there was no point in putting forth much effort for their masters, since there didn't appear to be much in it for them, especially if their masters were unkind and unjust. Believing slaves should remember that their real Master was Christ.

And what should they keep in mind about Christ as their Master? They were going to receive an inheritance from Him. What did it matter that they weren't being compensated for their labor? The Lord would reward them from the riches of His grace in the resurrection to eternal life. What did it matter that their earthly masters were harsh with them? That situation was only temporary, and even now they had a heavenly Master who was watching out for them.

Though these words were originally addressed to men and women in a situation very different from ours, they were recorded for us to help us in our own situations. No matter what kind of work we do, whether we are self-employed or working under a boss, we are serving the Lord Christ. We work for the truly good Master who laid down His life to redeem us from sin, death, and hell. From Him we have a promised inheritance.

O Lord Christ, in all our work keep us mindful that we are serving You. Amen.

And [Paul] found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla... So, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked; for by occupation they were tentmakers. Acts 18:2-3

Working Together

Paul's main work was proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It was to this that God had called him, and it was for this purpose that God had sent him out on his missionary journeys. But, at times, Paul found it necessary to provide for himself by making tents.

We see here how the Lord helped Paul, so that his working at a trade did not hinder his Gospel ministry. The Lord provided a devout couple who were also tentmakers to work with Paul.

And the arrangement was a good one: they labored together at their trade, making their work more productive. Aquila and Priscilla also provided Paul with a place to stay as a base for his gospel ministry in Corinth.

As we serve the Lord Christ in our daily work, He provides others to work with us. No matter what our occupation is, we have gotten our knowledge and skill through the instruction and encouragement of others. And we can reach out to others for help when we run into difficulties. The Lord whom we serve provides colleagues and coworkers to assist us.

Like Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla, we have fellow believers who work together with us to support the ministry of the Gospel. This is one of the blessings of membership in a Christian congregation. We are not solitary believers but part of a fellowship in which we assist one another in supporting and spreading the message of the forgiveness of sins and the hope of salvation in Christ.

Lord, give us fellow-workers to help us in our daily toil. Amen.

For I was the king's cupbearer. Nehemiah 1:11

Making Good Use of Your Station in Life

Godly men and women have always served the Lord in their earthly occupations. We can even say that they, too, served the Lord Christ, for they trusted in the promised Christ and in Him they were saved. Therefore it is right that, in this series, we should consider examples from the Old Testament.

Although the captivity was over, and many had returned to Jerusalem, Nehemiah was one of God's people who had remained in the land where the Jews had been exiled. In the Persian court of King Artaxerxes, Nehemiah was the king's cupbearer. That title sounds rather humble, but it was a high and important position. He had the responsibility to see to it that the king was not poisoned. His was a position of trust and confidence.

Nehemiah's job put him in a position to be of help and service to God's people. When he heard that Jerusalem, the temple, and the city walls were not being rebuilt, he was profoundly troubled. He prayed that God would move the king to allow him to go to Jerusalem and provide some much-needed leadership to rebuild the walls, the city, and the temple. He knew that this was God's plan for His people from whom the Savior was to come. God answered Nehemiah's prayer and the king gave him the leave of absence for which he had asked. God blessed his work in Jerusalem. Nehemiah used his high position to do God's work.

Though we have not been called to work in a king's palace, we may be confident that it is God who has placed us where we are. Whether our work is exalted or humble, it is where we serve the Lord Christ.

Lord, open our eyes to opportunities to serve you in our daily work. Amen.

Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God.

Acts 16:14

Making Good Use of the Means God has Given You

From very ancient times, Thyatira was known for its production of purple-dyed cloth. It was from this city that Lydia had come to Philippi to deal in these highly-prized wares which were worn by the rich and royalty. The account does not say outright that Lydia's trade was prosperous, but the picture of her here in Acts is that of a woman of some means. She was the owner of a house large enough to accommodate Paul and his coworkers, a house which served as the headquarters for their gospel ministry in Philippi.

Lydia was one of the group of women who met for worship in a spot outside the city by the river. When Paul went out to them and told them about Christ's life, death, and resurrection, the Spirit brought Lydia to faith. She and her whole household were baptized.

It wasn't that Paul asked her if they might make use of her house; it was Lydia's idea. And she didn't merely offer them accommodations; she insisted. Lydia had her heart set on helping to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ in her city. Lydia was so generous with what she had and felt so strongly about helping Paul because the Lord had opened her heart.

Lydia's generosity was a visible fruit of her faith in Jesus. Knowing that Jesus had given His life to pay for her sins, she saw her wealth not as a source of pride and prestige but as a gift from God that she wanted to use to serve Him.

Lord, open our hearts to use the fruit of our labor to serve You and give You glory. Amen.

And Ahab had called Obadiah, who was in charge of his house. (Now Obadiah feared the LORD greatly.) 1 Kings 18:3

Obeying God Rather than Men

“The days are evil,” Paul reminds us. (Ephesians 5:16) We surely see the truth of this statement in our day when practices and behaviors that rebel against God are carried on boldly, defended, and even praised. Hostility toward those who resist these evils has grown rapidly. This climate can make it difficult for many Christians to do their work.

Obadiah was likewise called to live and work in evil days. Ahab was king, and his wife Jezebel had institutionalized the worship of Baal in Israel, ordering the slaughter of the prophets of the true God. It was a dangerous time for a God-fearing man to be working in the palace. But that is where God had placed Obadiah; he was in charge of the king’s household.

Obadiah acted to save the lives of one hundred of the Lord’s prophets. By hiding and feeding them he put his own life at risk. And it wasn’t that Obadiah was a naturally bold or daring person; it was with fear and trembling that he carried out his rescue mission (1 Kings 18:7-16). It was God who supplied the courage.

Let’s not be afraid in these evil days. If the evil of our times makes our job challenging—even hazardous—we need only remember that our true Master is the Lord Christ, who died for us to redeem us, rose again to life, and now sits at the right hand of the Father where He reigns over all things for the benefit of His Church on earth.

Help me speak what’s right and good

And keep silence on occasion;

Help me pray, Lord, as I should,

Help me bear my tribulation;

Help me die and let my spirit

Everlasting life inherit.

The Lutheran Hymnal 411:7

“While the earth remains, Seedtime and harvest, Cold and heat, Winter and summer, And day and night, Shall not cease.” Genesis 8:22

God Promises to Provide

“What is your favorite season?” Some people do not like the cold or snow. If they live where the winters are cold, they make sure to visit warmer climates. Others do not like excessive heat, so they avoid being caught in the south in the summer. Still others enjoy living in places where there are distinct differences in the seasons with all the beauty and outdoor activities that each offers.

The changes which we see around us throughout the year are for more than just variety. Certainly the progression of the seasons is a creation and gift of our God. Throughout His world, God continues to provide for His creation by causing the plants and crops to grow so that His creation may be sustained and thrive. The promise in our verse above was first given to Noah and his family after the flood. It reminds us that our Lord will continue to bless us by physically sustaining us.

Through the seasons which He has created, God has put in place an orderly system which mankind can rely on. Just as surely as summer follows spring, we can trust our Lord will bring the fruits of the earth to flourish and provide food. The crops will be brought to a bountiful harvest, providing for people throughout the world. Our gardens will produce and we will have many things to enjoy. Due to the gracious providence of the Lord, our children will grow and be healthy and we will be given strength to carry our appointed tasks. Praise be to God for his abundant care!

From the days of Noah all the way through the times of our Savior Jesus, the promises of our God have come to pass. He will continue to provide for us all the days of our life!

Thank you heavenly Father for the promises you make to me in Your Word. Your promises remind me that I need never worry about your care for me. You always provide and will continue to all the days of my life! Amen.

To everything there is a season, A time for every purpose under heaven: A time to be born, And a time to die; A time to plant, And a time to pluck what is planted. Ecclesiastes 3:1-2

The Harvest is in God's Time

It has been several months now since we enjoyed the newness of spring. That is a season which many people eagerly look forward to—especially if they've spent several months in the cold, repeatedly shoveling new snow away. Spring is a time of new beginnings and growth. During that time, people in much of the country plant their crops and gardens. It is a season of hope. As Solomon tells us, there is “a time to plant.”

Our Lord truly does all things at the proper time. Our Lord has also appointed each of us to have our own seasons. There is an early season: “a time to be born.” God calls us into being. Then, in His grace, He calls us to faith through His gospel. As He washes our sins away in baptism, He welcomes us into His family and kingdom.

Then there is that “growing season” that we enter and remain in. Parents teach their young children some of the elementary truths of the Scriptures. Sunday School and Confirmation classes continue to water those seeds that have been planted. As the spiritual growth continues through the school years and into adulthood, the Lord is continuing to nurture that faith which He has created. As that Word is present and heard, He promises regular growth. Throughout our lives, this faith blossoms and produces fruit as we continue to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior.

Finally comes the time to “pluck what is planted.” Just as the crops in the fields will reach maturity after a few months and be harvested, our Lord will graciously bring us to Himself in heaven. We can be sure it will be done in His perfect time!

Heavenly Father, continue to bless me as I hear and read Your saving Word that I may grow in faith and serve you here and eternally! Amen.

He waters the hills from His upper chambers; The earth is satisfied with the fruit of Your works. He causes the grass to grow for the cattle, And vegetation for the service of man, That he may bring forth food from the earth. Psalm 104:13-14

It is God Who Provides for His Creation

Throughout history, different peoples have used a variety of means to try to “make it rain.” Some have appealed to a variety of gods, others have held special dances, others have made some sort of sacrifice. All this is done in the hopes of having the heavens open up and shower upon them the means to have their crops grow and their lives sustained.

Of course, none of those methods help anything. They only show an ignorance of the true God who provides for all of creation! The psalm writer recognized this when he said in our verses for today that “He waters the hills from His upper chambers.” Our God has created the systems of nature which we see in our world and also keeps them going. Because of the goodness of the Lord, “The earth is satisfied with the fruit of Your works.”

Whether someone recognizes it or not, it is the Lord who continues to bless the earth by watering it and making things grow and flourish. Whether one is a believer or not, our gracious and loving God continues to provide. As we see all of the things that the Lord provides for His creation, we see a witness of our God’s care for us and for all people.

Of all the many things which God provides for us, the greatest by far is His gift of salvation. Through the redemption worked by the sacrifice of our Savior Jesus, God has provided for our eternal life. Because of Him, we are truly “satisfied with the fruit of Your works!”

Heavenly Father, thank You for your many physical blessings which we receive from Your bountiful goodness. Cause us to see your love for us in how You provide for us, especially in the salvation which we have in Christ. Amen.

Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest." Matthew 9:37-38

Laborers in the Lord's Harvest

"Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves. We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves." So sang the congregation in the small church on the TV version of "Little House on the Prairie." The Laura Ingalls family had lived in the upper Midwest in the late 1800s, not in a faraway "mission field." But the refrain of that old hymn reminds us of a couple truths that Jesus speaks of here in Matthew: we are workers in the Lord's harvest field; and wherever we are is really a mission field in the midst of the Lord's great harvest of souls.

As the Lord looks out into the world, He sees a harvest that is great. It is made up of people from all walks of life and found among the peoples of all nations. As Jesus says, it is truly a plentiful harvest. So, who will bring in this great harvest of souls? Who will "bring in the sheaves?" Jesus gave encouragement to His disciples by telling them to pray to the Lord that more laborers would be sent out into His harvest.

Jesus sent His own apostles as laborers in His harvest. The Christian church has been praying for laborers to go out with the Gospel ever since that time. Missionaries are called and supported for this very purpose.

Each believer has been given the tools for the harvest. We have the saving Gospel of our Lord Jesus. You and I know what our God has done for us and what He wants for all people. As we pray for more harvest workers and share the gospel, let us rejoice as the sheaves of believers are brought into God's eternal kingdom!

Dear Lord, give us a growing knowledge of your Word that we may be able to share it with others. Amen.

“Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!” John 4:35b

Harvest Home

Can you tell from a distance when something is ready to be harvested or picked? Sometimes this is easier said than done. As a child, it sometimes appeared to me from the road that the oat, barley, or wheat field was ready to be harvested. “Not yet,” would be the verdict from our father. “It’s still too green out there. We can’t get the combine out yet.” A closer inspection would prove that to be true. Even today, with some less common fruits, I have resorted to asking how to tell if something is ripe or not.

When is God’s harvest ready? Consider this question on an individual level. When someone has been brought to believe in the Savior by the transforming power of the Gospel, they have saving faith. They have all they need to enter the eternal rest won and prepared for them by their Lord.

At our church, we have a fall service called “Harvest Home.” It is a time reserved not only for giving thanks for the harvest of the fields, but also for considering how we are part of God’s harvest which will finally in its time be brought home to be with our Lord.

Our Savior knows without a doubt those who are His. He knows when the harvest is ready. From our viewpoint, we may wonder why one person lives to be ninety-five years old, and why someone else is taken at a much younger age. Yet the Lord alone knows when someone is ready to take up their eternal residence at their home in heaven. For this we give thanks.

What a joy to see our Lord continue to prepare His harvest by sending the Gospel out into all the world!

Heavenly Father, we give thanks that You have brought us to faith and made us part of Your great harvest of souls unto eternal life! Amen.

*Moreover I saw under the sun...*Ecclesiastes 3:16 (Read 3:16-22)

Under the Sun

The expression “under the sun” is repeated 29 times in Ecclesiastes. This is significant. Many of the observations of “the Preacher” (1:1) are from an earthly vantage point and not how they appear to God.

People look for some value in their lives. Some see it in money, others see it in power. Some take pride in family, others take pride in their jobs. Some try to leave a legacy for future generations—an invention, a scientific discovery, a great novel, a mighty victory in battle—in the end, however, it’s all a lie.

“I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind.” (1:14) “Then I hated all my labor in which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me.” (2:18) “There is a severe evil which I have seen under the sun: riches kept for their owner to his hurt.” (5:13) “For the living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, their hatred, and their envy have now perished; nevermore will they have a share in anything done under the sun.” (9:5,6)

So it goes when things are viewed from an earthly perspective. However, when viewed from a heavenly perspective, it is quite different. Looking at things through the eyes of God, we see both an amazing plan to provide eternal salvation and the design for the execution of this plan through the proclamation of the Gospel. All else that happens, though it seems like emptiness, is used by God to accomplish His great and gracious purpose.

Heavenly Father, turn my focus away from the things of this world. Lift my eyes to things above, where Christ is seated at Your right hand. Only there will I see the things that are solid, everlasting, and glorious. Hear my prayer for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

Moreover I saw under the sun: in the place of judgment, wickedness was there; and in the place of righteousness, iniquity was there. I said in my heart, “God shall judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every purpose and for every work.” Ecclesiastes 3:16,17 (Read 3:16-22)

In His Time

A woman spills hot coffee on her lap and sues for millions. Is that justice? Politicians tell lies, but don't have to pay for it. Is that justice? Preachers are paid big salaries for teaching falsehoods. Will there ever be justice?

“I said in my heart, ‘God shall judge the righteous and the wicked.’” God knows those who have been clothed with the righteousness of Christ. Likewise, He sees the wickedness of unbelievers. However, God is biding His time, waiting for the right moment to carry out His justice. “There is a time for every purpose and for every work.” Each event, each circumstance is right in its time, even if we cannot recognize this. We tend to think that God should do things right at the time of our choosing. How long, O Lord? When will You avenge us?

God is not ignoring the cries of His people. Didn't He, at the right time, send His Son to pay for our sins? It is Jesus who declared: “Shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily.” (Luke 18:7-8) Judgment will come in God's good time. Then, we who are cleansed in the blood of Jesus will hear His voice: “Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” (Matthew 25:34)

I wait for You, O LORD, my soul waits, and in Your Word I do hope. My soul waits for You more than those who watch for the morning—yes, more than those who watch for the morning. Even so, come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.

I said in my heart, "Concerning the condition of the sons of men, God tests them, that they may see that they themselves are like animals." Ecclesiastes 3:18 (Read 3:16-22)

God Tests Them

In the previous devotion, we saw how God operates according to His own time frame. As we wait for His final act of justice, we may be perplexed by what is going on in the world today: warfare, violence, lawlessness, promiscuity, rampant dishonesty, disrespect, baby-killing.

The "sons of men" are acting like animals. Animals have many sexual partners, often kill their young, and devour other animals. People are acting the same way. People are doing whatever is necessary to satisfy their own fleshly appetites.

Since they act like beasts, God treats them like beasts. He is testing them, "that they may see that they themselves are like animals." This is the reason for God allowing many of the hardships that plague the world: hurricanes, tornados, floods, fires, wars, financial upheaval, pandemics, etc. God is testing the sons of men in order to show them that they are like animals.

As for us, we are the sons of God and live in faith and love. Living in the midst of the sons of men, we must often endure the same hardships. However, since we have been raised with Christ, we do not set our mind on things on the earth. Instead, we seek those things which are above, where Christ is at God's right hand. (Colossians 3:1) Cleansed in the blood of Christ and waiting for heaven, we endure with meekness (humble, uncomplaining acceptance of God's will). And, while we endure, as we have opportunity, we should reach out with the only source of solace and hope, the Gospel. God is trying to lead the wicked to repentance.

Heavenly Father, open the eyes of the multitudes, so that they may repent of their evil. Show them the forgiveness that is found at Jesus' cross and empty tomb. Help us all to lift our eyes from the earth to the heavens as we await the return of our Savior. Grant these requests for Jesus' sake. Amen.

For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all is vanity. All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust. Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, which goes down to the earth? Ecclesiastes 3:19-21 (Read 3:16-21)

All Return to Dust

From the vantage point of this earth, we cannot tell any difference between the death of a man and that of an animal. Both cease breathing, responding, and acting. Instead, they begin to decay. “All go to one place... all return to dust.” Under the sun, no one is able to observe what happens to the spirit of man after death. So, once again, God lets human beings see themselves as beasts. Facing death is the greatest of all tests.

The result is that they despair of their materialistic, self-indulgent lives. Drug use, mental distress, and suicides can result from such despair. People see their beastly existence and they give up. They need something to save them from despair, to lift them out of their beastly existence.

Your church might appear to be a very small voice in a huge world, yet this still, small voice has a very big message. It is a message that we are sending to the distant reaches of the planet: “Christ is risen! His sacrifice frees us from sin and death. Whoever believes in Him will not perish like the beasts, but will have everlasting life.”

O God, grant us the strength to rise up, the desire to speak up, and the ability to cry out with our little voice: «Come unto Jesus, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and He will give you rest. Hear us for Jesus’ sake. Amen

So I perceived that nothing is better than that a man should rejoice in his own works, for that is his heritage. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him? Ecclesiastes 3:22 (Read 3:16-22)

God's Plans

In the devotions which appeared in the previous issue of "Daily Rest," we saw that God has put eternity in the hearts of all people. As for our time on earth, we learned that "Everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it, and there is nothing to take from it, for God has so worked that men should fear Him." (3:14)

So where does that leave us? Fatalism says, "You can't do anything about it." Divine providence, however, says, "Get busy, because God is working out His plan in and through you." "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going." (9:10) Once you have passed from this world, you can no longer be a part of the Master plan here on earth.

Carpe diem: "Seize the day." Make the most of it. But how? Our text tells us that there is nothing better than to rejoice and to do good in one's lifetime. Rejoice that God has things planned out and it's all for your good (Romans 8:28). Then, as each opportunity presents itself, do good. This is the best way to react to divine providence: rejoice and do good.

In a much larger way, all of us can seize the day by proclaiming the Gospel. Whenever and wherever God gives us the opportunity, we should seize it. This is what His plan is all about. What better good can we do? What greater cause for rejoicing is there? We are forgiven. Our neighbor is forgiven. Does he know it? God, help us to share our joy by giving the good news to him.

With hearts full of love
 For grace from above,
 We spread the good news of the Lord
 To family and friends
 And earth's distant ends,
 Rejoicing in His saving Word.

“God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” John 4:24

Spirit

What does it mean to be a spirit? This word is often used in our society to speak of a ghost or other spiritual being. The word “spirit” means a bodiless being. Thus, if God is a spirit, He does not have a physical body. We all have physical bodies for that is what allows you to be seen and recognized by others. God cannot be seen with our human eyes. Therefore, the truth that God cannot be seen with our human eyes shows us that He is unique.

While God is spirit, some may wonder why Jesus, who is God, has a body. Jesus became flesh, took on a body, to be our Savior. As our Savior, he is both God and man so that He can suffer and die to remove our sins while at the same time being perfect and sinless. Therefore, as God, He is a spirit. As man, He has a body.

Jesus, who is God, speaks these words when instructing the Samaritan woman at the well concerning the worship of God. He speaks of God as a spirit to remind His hearers that the worship of God is not confined to a singular place, such as the temple in Jerusalem. Rather, He confines the worship of God to be done in spirit and truth. Worshiping God in truth means to worship according to His Word by using what God has revealed to us in His Word. Worshiping Him in spirit is worshiping Him from a heart that trusts only in Him as our Savior. All of this is only possible when the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, leads us with our hearts, minds, and mouths to praise God as our Creator, Preserver, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.

Grant that Thy Spirit prompt my praises,
 Then shall my singing surely please Thine ear;
 Sweet are the sounds my heart then raises,
 My prayer in truth and spirit Thou wilt hear.
 Then shall Thy Spirit raise my heart to Thee
 To sing Thee psalms of praise in high degree.

The Lutheran Hymnal 21:3

“Am I a God near at hand,” says the LORD, “And not a God afar off? Can anyone hide himself in secret places, So I shall not see him?” says the LORD; “Do I not fill heaven and earth?” says the LORD. Jeremiah 23:23-24

Omnipresent

The word “omnipresent” means to be present anywhere and everywhere. God is omnipresent. He asks Jeremiah whether He is a God that stays at an arm’s distance so that He is near in times of trouble but is not near at other times. The answer is that God is present at all times. He asks Jeremiah whether an individual can hide from Him. Again, He is always present. The last leading question is whether God fills heaven and earth. These questions bring to the forefront that He is everywhere while always being present. These leading questions show that God is omnipresent.

There is comfort for us as believers to know that God is omnipresent. We can be confident that He is with us wherever we go. Whether we are at work, school, home, or in public, God is with us. When problems and illness enter life’s path, we can know that God is right there watching over us. At all times, we can turn to God in prayer knowing that He is present hearing our requests. Therefore, we can say with David, “Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there.” (Psalm 139:7-8)

God Himself is present: Let us now adore Him

And with awe appear before Him.

God is in His temple--

All within keep silence,

Prostrate lie with deepest reverence.

Him alone God we own,

Him, our God and Savior; Praise His name forever.

The Lutheran Hymnal 4:1

Jesus looked at them and said to them, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” Matthew 19:26

Omnipotent

In the words of this morning’s devotion, Jesus answers the disciples’ question about how anyone can be saved. He answers that no one can save himself, but with God all things are possible. This shows the omnipotence or all-powerfulness of God. Unlike us, God has all power over everything in heaven and on earth. Shortly before His ascension into heaven, Jesus states, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.” (Matthew 28:18 KJV) Jesus, being true God as well as man, reminds us of the power of God. His power is unlimited; therefore, nothing is impossible for God to do.

An example of God’s power can be seen in creation. As we examine creation, we come to one conclusion: only an all-powerful God could make everything. This display of power in creation shows that God has power over all. This power extends to His providing for all our needs as well as His protection for all that endangers our physical and spiritual life. His preservation and protection will continue for us as long as we still are on this earth. This is certainly a comforting thought that the all-powerful God will take care of all our needs.

In addition to God’s power observed in the creation and His preservation and protection of us, the power of God is also seen in our salvation from sin and Satan. As Jesus reminds His disciples, salvation is only possible with God. Because of our sinfulness, we are weak. However, God is all-powerful. He has defeated Satan and removed sin. Only through the all-powerful God is there salvation for us. On the cross of Calvary, Jesus was triumphant in defeating all our spiritual enemies. Often in this world a show of power is terrifying, however our all-powerful God shows us His power to comfort us with the assurance of our salvation.

Oh, worship the King All glorious above:

Oh, gratefully sing His power and His love,

Our Shield and Defender, The Ancient of Days,

Pavilioned in splendor And girded with praise!

The Lutheran Hymnal 17:1

O LORD, You have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, And are acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word on my tongue, But behold, O LORD, You know it altogether. Psalm 139:1-4

Omniscient

The world seeks wisdom and knowledge, but God knows everything. The attribute of God knowing everything is called omniscience. Omniscience shows that God knows and applies all wisdom according to His will. The words of David in Psalm 139 show the omniscience of God. David states that the Lord God searches him and knows him. No, God has not lost David, so He does not need to find him. Rather, He searches David's heart and mind to understand his thoughts. He knows David intimately. Likewise, God knows each of us in the same way. He knows whether we are sitting or sleeping. He understands our thoughts and our habits. God knows every thought, word, and deed. He knows each of us in every way.

To our sinful flesh, the omniscience of God may be frightening, for God knowing every sinful thought, word, and deed may cause us distress and despair. However, as believers, this attribute of God is a great comfort. He not only knows our secret sins, but He promises to forgive us. The apostle John states, "For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things." (1 John 3:20) Although our heart convicts us of sin, our all-knowing God forgives us. There is the comfort of God's omniscience, for He knows our sins and takes them away so that we have forgiveness.

Let all thy converse be sincere,
 Thy conscience as the noonday clear;
 Think how the all-seeing God thy ways
 And all thy secret thought surveys.
 All praise to Thee, who safe hast kept
 And hast refreshed me whilst I slept.
 Grant, Lord, when I from death shall wake,
 I may of endless light partake.

The Lutheran Hymnal 536:2-3

Before the mountains were brought forth, Or ever You had formed the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God. Psalm 90:2

Eternal

Living forever gives us an insight into the concept of being eternal. The word “eternal” means to have no beginning and no end. Thus, if you are eternal, you were not born, nor will you die. God was not born, nor will He die; therefore, He is eternal. In the words of the psalm, Moses declares the eternalness of God. He writes that God existed before the mountains were formed. He proclaims that God formed the mountains as well as the earth and all that exists in creation. The truth that God created the world reveals to us that He existed before creation. At the creation of the world, He created time with the sun, moon, and stars as its markers. Being in time, we are unable to comprehend the concept of being eternal. However, God is eternal.

The eternalness of God gives us comfort, for it shows us that God does not change. The writer of Hebrews writes, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.” (Hebrews 13:8) As God, Jesus is eternal and thus is always the same. God, who is always the same, reveals to us that His plan of salvation does not change, and it is eternal. It is a comfort that salvation with God never changes; because of this, we are confident that we are saved. God is eternal, and we know by faith that we will live with Him in heaven for all eternity.

Before the hills in order stood
 Or earth received her frame,
 From everlasting Thou art God,
 To endless years the same.
 A thousand ages in Thy sight
 Are like an evening gone,
 Short as the watch that ends the night
 Before the rising sun.

The Lutheran Hymnal 123:3-4

Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing. But Philip was found at Azotus. And passing through, he preached in all the cities till he came to Caesarea. Acts 8:39-40

Philip

“I can’t do evangelism. I’m not a pastor.” Some people think of evangelism as something only pastors can do. That isn’t true. Not in Scripture, and not for us today. The LORD calls all those whom He has redeemed from sin and brought to faith to be a witness of Him to those around them.

The Philip of our text is a fine example of a layman who did just that. This is not Philip the apostle, but Philip the deacon. He, along with six others, was chosen to help the apostles by assisting with the physical needs of their fellow Christians. He didn’t have a seminary degree. But he was a man “of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.” (Acts 6:3) Even though he wasn’t seminary trained, Philip had come to know that Jesus was His Savior and the Savior of all people. This led him to do more than just assist with the physical needs of his fellow Christians. As he went about his day to day activities, he told others about his Savior.

Philip’s evangelism is a reminder that we don’t have to cross the globe to do mission work. There are plenty of people that need to learn about Jesus in our own neighborhoods. The LORD led Philip to witness to individuals from surprising backgrounds. He took Jesus and the message about Him into his daily life preaching to all who would listen. And the message about Jesus that Philip brought to these people changed their lives, and has the same power to change lives today!

Lord, use us to tell others about Jesus. Amen.

**If you cannot speak like angels, if you cannot preach like Paul,
You can tell the love of Jesus, you can say He died for all.
If you cannot rouse the wicked with the Judgment’s dread alarms,
You can lead the little children to the Savior’s waiting arms.**

The Lutheran Hymnal 496:2

When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. Acts 11:23-24

Barnabas

Human beings are not identical. We have unique God-given gifts and abilities. Whatever gifts we have, those are given by the LORD for use in building up His kingdom. Peter writes: “As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God... that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.” (1 Peter 4:10-11)

The man mentioned in our verses today is another example of someone who used his unique gifts to share the good news about Jesus with others. His given name was Joses, but we know him best by the nickname that was given to him by the apostles: Barnabas (see Acts 4:36). His gift was that of encouragement. Barnabas was an optimist, looking for the best in the people and situations around him. The LORD used this quality in Barnabas for the work of His church on earth. In Acts 11 Luke describes how Barnabas was sent to the city of Antioch to encourage the new Christians there. In a sense, even encouraging your fellow believers or new believers is a form of evangelism. Barnabas “encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord.”

This wasn’t the only kind of evangelism Barnabas did. The Holy Spirit also called Barnabas to be a traveling companion of the Apostle Paul on the first missionary journey (Acts 13-14). There he was an encourager for Paul and their fellow companions and a sharer of the Gospel with those who did not know Jesus. Thank God for the unique gifts He gives His children!

Lord, use us to encourage our fellow believers. Amen.

**We go Your mighty Word to speak
Till faith shall dawn and doubt depart,
To awe the bold, to stay the weak,
And bind and heal the broken heart.**

The Lutheran Hymnal 499:4 (adapted)

Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus. Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God. Then all who heard were amazed, and said, "Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?" But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ. Acts 9:19b-22

Saul

"I can't be an evangelist. Do you know what I have done?" Does your past—your public sins or failings—create a roadblock for preaching the Gospel? It shouldn't. If we, like Saul, have been led to genuine repentance over our sin, we can be sure that God can use our witness to reach others.

There may be times when those who know our past sins are hesitant to listen to what we have to say. But this is not an excuse to become silent about the Savior who has led us out of a life of sin to a life of service by His grace. In fact, our failures and God's grace through repentance and forgiveness are a powerful testimony to others who are burdened by their sin.

Saul had been traveling to Damascus to gather up and persecute Christians. But Jesus had other plans. He brought the great persecutor of the Church to know Him as his Savior. If anyone had a right to be concerned about his reception because of his past, it was Saul. But this didn't stop him. "Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues" Luke tells us. Saul would later write: "For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel." (1 Corinthians 9:16)

Lord, don't allow my past sins to prevent me from sharing Your Word. Amen.

Knowing You and Your salvation, grateful love dare never cease
To proclaim Your tender mercies, gracious Lord, Your heav'nly peace.
Sound we forth the Gospel tidings to the earth's remotest bound
That the sinner has been pardoned and forgiveness can be found.

The Lutheran Hymnal 498:4 (adapted)

Now a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures, came to Ephesus. This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John. So he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. Acts 18:24-26

Apollos

“I’m not good with words. I can’t be an evangelist.” What makes a good evangelist? When we look at Apollos we might think it is eloquence. But not everyone is eloquent like Apollos. Does that mean you can’t be an evangelist? Not at all. In fact, while God certainly uses gifts like eloquence, that gift is not a requirement for being an evangelist.

We find in Apollos a quality that is of greater importance for the Christian: knowledge of the Scriptures. Apollos was “mighty in the Scriptures.” One might say, “I’m not like Apollos in that way either. I don’t know the Scriptures very well.” Apollos didn’t always know the Scriptures well. He “had been instructed in the way of the Lord” and had the help of Aquila and Priscilla who “explained to him the way of God more accurately.”

We have control over what we know. We are told to “search the Scriptures” (John 5:39), and to “teach them to our children.” (Deuteronomy 11:19) God wants us to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 3:18) Our knowledge of the Scriptures is an ongoing process throughout our entire lives. Don’t wait until you “know it all”. Tell others what you do know about Jesus, and as you grow in your knowledge, you will have more to share.

Lord, give us a love for and knowledge of Your Word, that we may be better witnesses of You. Amen.

**His strength within my weakness will make me bold to say
How His redeeming power transforms my stubborn clay;
His touch of fire ignites me, with courage I am sent,
My tongue-tied silence broken, with grace made eloquent.**

Worship Supplement 772:3

Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word. Acts 8:4

Every Christian (Including You!)

When was the last time you talked with someone about Jesus? Who was the last person you invited to come to church? Has it been a while? We often lose sight of what our purpose is as Christians. Jesus has redeemed us from death and its punishment in hell. He has sent His Holy Spirit to bring us to faith through the preaching of His Word by others. Now we are His. We are no longer our own. By virtue of the Spirit-worked faith in Jesus, Christians become witnesses of the ever-living Savior of all people. It is our calling, our purpose, for the rest of the time the LORD gives us on this earth.

David says: “Your saints shall bless You. They shall speak of the glory of Your kingdom, And talk of Your power, To make known to the sons of men His mighty acts, And the glorious majesty of His kingdom.” (Psalm 145:10-12) This is exactly what we see the believers in the early church doing. They gathered together to study God’s Word. They eagerly shared the truth of what God had done in Jesus with everyone around them, everywhere they went, with each person they encountered. Was it easy? No. Some were killed. Others were beaten and imprisoned. Many were persecuted. It isn’t difficult to talk about Jesus to others, but it does come with challenges.

Not everyone is going to want to hear what we have to say. But it doesn’t matter. We have a precious calling. Souls are in need of what only Jesus can give. And you can share it with them. Plant a seed. Water it. Watch it grow as the Word does what God says it will!

Lord, overcome our fear and shame and make us effective witnesses of Your salvation. Amen.

**Dear Lord, to Your true servants give
the grace to You alone to live.
Set free from sin to serve You, Lord,
we go to share Your living Word,
The Gospel message to proclaim
that all may know Your saving name.**

Worship Supplement 780:1 (adapted)

Weekend Rest Journal

1. Read Acts chapter 3. The Lord opens a door for Peter and John to bring the Gospel to a large group of people through a gift to a lame man. Study Peter's message to these people. It has three main parts that we can use in our witnessing to others. Consider these points.
 - A. Peter's message points to Jesus. Find the names used to describe Jesus in v.13-26.
 - B. Peter's message uses both Law and Gospel. Find examples of Law (revealing sin) and Gospel (revealing salvation).
 - C. Peter's message is founded on God's Word. What two Old Testament passages does Peter use?

2. Read Acts chapter 10. In these verses the Lord opens another door for Peter in an amazing way. Pay close attention to the message Peter gives in this chapter.
 - A. What does he tell us about God? (v.34)
 - B. What important events in the life of Jesus does he emphasize? (v.38-40)
 - C. What is his conclusion? (v.43)

3. Consider what might prevent you from talking to our family or friends about Jesus. Pray for boldness and encouragement to share the Gospel.

Now it came to pass... as I was among the captives by the River Chebar, that the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God... Then I looked, and behold, a whirlwind was coming out of the north, a great cloud with raging fire engulfing itself; and brightness was all around it and radiating out of its midst like the color of amber, out of the midst of the fire.

Ezekiel 1:1-4

God Doesn't Lose and Neither Do We

Do you know who Marduk is? Marduk was the chief deity of Babylon. He was known as the storm god. The Babylonians claimed Marduk gave them victory over Israel. Israel was left reeling in a spiritual crisis. They had believed that their God was the greatest God, yet they had been defeated. Did that mean that Marduk, the god of the Babylonians, was real and more powerful than the LORD? Ezekiel showed them and us the true storm God, coming in a great and awesome storm from the north. It was not Marduk. It was Jehovah. He alone is God. He hadn't lost and really neither had Israel. Sure they had been defeated, but God had allowed it for their good. Israel was to see that and rejoice.

It is good for a broken bone that has healed improperly to be broken again so that it can be set right. Israel's foolishness and pride had caused their faith to grow crooked and misplaced. They needed to be broken so that their faith could grow true and be built firmly on the LORD alone and His promise of a Savior King. This Savior King would do something even better than deliver them from Babylon, He would deliver them and us from our sin.

Big trouble can make us doubt God. See this vision of Ezekiel and know that the Lord is awesome in power and holiness. He doesn't lose, and in Him, neither do we because He is for you and with you. He sanctifies even your troubles.

Lord, let me see that you are our very present help in trouble.
Amen.

Then the hand of the LORD was upon me there, and He said to me... "Lie also on your left side, and lay the iniquity of the house of Israel upon it. According to the number of the days that you lie on it, you shall bear their iniquity, according to the number of the days, three hundred and ninety days; ...I have laid on you a day for each year. "Therefore you shall set your face toward the siege of Jerusalem; your arm shall be uncovered, and you shall prophesy against it. "And surely I will restrain you so that you cannot turn from one side to another till you have ended the days of your siege." Ezekiel 3:22-4:8

He Bore It!

What can you bear for the sake of Jesus? What about lying on your left side for 390 days without moving? God had Ezekiel do this to show Israel how long Jerusalem would be punished. Could you bear something that difficult? You sure could. If the Lord called you to bear something, He would equip you to bear it just as God did with Ezekiel. God doesn't ask you to do more than you can bear.

So why do so many things we face seem unbearable? Because Satan is a liar and our sinful nature is weak. Satan knows that one of the best ways to drive a wedge between you and God is to make you resent God. If you listen to Satan's lies, you will begin to believe that you cannot bear your burdens anymore, and you will begin to think it isn't fair.

Satan is kinda right. We can't bear our burdens. We can't bear the burden of our sins. The punishment for them is far more than 390 days. It is death forever where the worm does not die and the fire does not go out. We can't bear that, but Jesus bore it so what we have for eternity is sins forgiven and life in heaven. With that burden removed, we don't really have any real burdens do we?

Lord, let me gladly take up my cross and follow you. Amen.

Thus says the Lord GOD: "I will gather you from the peoples, assemble you from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel." "And they will go there, and they will take away all its detestable things and all its abominations from there. "Then I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them, and take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh, "that they may walk in My statutes and keep My judgments and do them; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God." Ezekiel 11:17-20

If I Only Had a Heart...

Scattered Israel did not feel like God's people. What, they wondered, did they have to do to be good with God again? Ezekiel tells us in our text how to be God's people. It might seem like the answer is to keep God's statutes and judgements but that is actually downstream from the answer. The answer is to get a heart.

Most of you have probably heard that song from the Wizard of Oz. The Tin Man sings "If I only had a heart: I'd be tender, I'd be gentle, and awful sentimental, regarding love and art." At the end of The Wizard of Oz, the Tin Man discovers that he had a heart all along. He just needed to be more confident in himself. Is that the message here? No, that is the opposite of the message here. It was trusting in their own heart that led the Israelites to commit terrible sins and be scattered among the nations.

Through the message of prophets like Ezekiel, God had begun to give out new hearts. Some of the exiles began to not be resentful at their exile but to see it as a gracious act of the merciful God. God had given them hearts to acknowledge their own sin and turn to the Lord and His promise of a Savior for forgiveness. This heart made them, and makes us, His people.

**Lord give me a new heart and renew in me the joy of salvation.
Amen.**

Thus says the Lord GOD: "I will cause a stormy wind to break forth in My fury; and there shall be a flooding rain in My anger, and great hailstones in fury to consume it. So I will break down the wall you have plastered with untempered mortar, and bring it down to the ground, so that its foundation will be uncovered; it will fall, and you shall be consumed in the midst of it. Then you shall know that I am the LORD." Ezekiel 13:13-16

A Wall that Does Not Fall

Most of the people did not want to believe what Ezekiel was telling them: Jerusalem would be destroyed because of its hard-hearted idolatry. Against this truth the people had built walls of lies and excuses. They told themselves God would never let Jerusalem fall. They told themselves that the Gentiles were worse sinners than they were. They told themselves all kinds of lies to make themselves feel better. God would destroy the walls of their lies and the walls of Jerusalem. And even as their lies would not prevent Jerusalem from falling, their lies would not protect them from God's eternal judgment.

We build walls too. We build walls of lies to "protect" ourselves from things we don't want to see, things like our sinfulness in a certain area. We build walls to excuses and defend what we have done instead of repenting. Do you think those excuses, those walls will stand before the tempest of God's wrath on the last day?

Yet there is a wall we can stand behind that will stand. It is a wall built of two pieces of wood and a few nails. As far as walls go that doesn't seem like much, does it? Yet the wood that Jesus, the promised Savior, would be nailed to is a wall that stands forever. There, we are forgiven. There, Jesus was charged and condemned for the sin of the world. If we stand behind any other wall than that, we are lost. If we stand behind that wall, we cannot be lost. It stands.

Lord, let me take shelter from my sins behind your cross. There I am forgiven. Amen.

“Therefore speak to them, and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “Everyone of the house of Israel who sets up his idols in his heart, and puts before him what causes him to stumble into iniquity, and then comes to the prophet, I the LORD will answer him who comes, according to the multitude of his idols.” Ezekiel 14:4

The Jesus Bypass

You know that feeling right? You didn't see the bump in the road and you go over it at full speed. You come down with a crunch, wondering if your transmission is lying on the road behind you. How stupid would it be to deliberately plow over speed bump after speed bump ignoring how it destroys your car? The elders of Israel were that stupid. God had put speed bump after speed bump in front of them to get them to realize that they were going the wrong way. They were doing spiritual damage to themselves and their nation and yet they kept deliberately doing it.

We, in carelessness and weakness, allow idols to sneak their way into our hearts too. Letting earthly joys and concerns, people, and things, take top spot in our heart. In grace, God may throw some speed bumps in our life to get us to see the idols we have been worshiping and cast them out. Don't be like the elders of Israel on the road to hell, ignoring God's speed bumps. Repent and come to God through your Savior Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit calls us to the Jesus bypass. Instead of putting obstacles between you and Christ by impenitence, the Spirit removes those obstacles by leading us in contrition and faith. Now the obstacle is placed between you and Satan. The cross stands on Satan's path, blocking His schemes and accusations. The cross stands between us and what we deserve for our transgressions. Jesus is the bypass that takes us away from hell and into heaven.

Lord, help me to throw every idol out of my heart and treasure you above all else. Amen.

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. Ephesians 6:10-11

Strong in God's Armor

Strength and weakness is something everyone knows about. Everyone possesses qualities that are strengths and others that are weaknesses. What's really disappointing is when you think you are strong, and that strength instead becomes a fatal weakness.

This week we are talking about spiritual warfare. In this warfare, human strength becomes our fatal weakness. Does any Christian ever think that they are strong enough to take on Satan? Thankfully, that is not what we are called to do. Christ defeated Satan through the cross and the empty tomb. You don't have to defeat anyone. All you have to do is stand.

Paul commands us here to "be strong." He must not know whom he is dealing with. On our own, we are defined by our weaknesses and our lack of strength. But this is not the case, not with Christ on our side. Paul knows exactly to whom he is talking. Namely, he is talking to the Christian. We are not commanded to be strong of our own means, rather, to be strong in the Lord Jesus. Put on the armor that Christ has won for you and given to you! This will allow you to be strong in the Lord and be able to withstand anything that Satan can throw at you.

Are you strong? The real question is: "Do you believe in Christ?" If the answer is yes, then that means that you are strong. Rely on that strength. Rely on the strength that has been given to you by Jesus.

**Soldiers of Christ, arise
And put your armor on,
Strong in the strength which God supplies
Thro' His eternal Son;
Strong in the Lord of hosts
And in His mighty power
Who in the strength of Jesus trusts
Is more than conqueror.**

The Lutheran Hymnal 450:1-2

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Ephesians 6:12

Wrestle Against Darkness

Have you ever seen a wrestling match? I'm not talking about what is referred to as "Professional Wrestling," which is filled with made up drama, and the outcomes are determined beforehand. I'm talking about real wrestling, collegiate and Olympic wrestling. It is one of the most physically demanding sports there is. Your whole goal is trying to pin your opponent to the ground while they are trying to do the same thing to you. It is a war of attrition.

The Christian is called to such action. Except this is not some friendly competition, where players shake hands afterward. Rather this is a life-or-death struggle. If your spiritual enemies pin you, there is no getting up off the mat from that. You must not underestimate your opponent. You need to know who it is you will struggle against. Who do we struggle against? Paul says, we wrestle against demonic forces who are not of this world. Satan and his demons will do anything in their power to drag you down to hell with them.

Make no mistake about it; facing such forces is a struggle. It is a conflict and a wrestling match. It is one that we will have to continue throughout this life. This is why we are instructed to put on this armor. They fight in spiritual ways. We must wrestle spiritually as well. It's good to know your enemy. But it's even better to know who gives you the victory. Yes, our enemies are terrifying. But Jesus will empower us to overcome them. We will struggle. But the struggle is worth it because the victory is complete. May Christ empower us to continue the struggle!

Fight the good fight With all thy might;
Christ is thy Strength and Christ thy Right.
Lay hold on life, and it shall be
Thy joy and crown eternally.

The Lutheran Hymnal 447:1

Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness. Ephesians 6:13-14

Able to Stand

Is it hard to stand up? For most of us, it is quite easy. It's one of the first things we do when we wake up. We stand up out of bed. But for others, this is not just hard, it is impossible. Some are bedridden. Some, like the youngest of us, cannot stand on their own. It is a skill that must be learned. And it is a skill that can be taken away.

As was noted in a previous devotion, the Christian is not called on to overthrow. In our spiritual warfare, we are not called on to defeat Satan or any other force. Jesus took care of that. We are merely called to stand. You would think that being equipped in armor would make standing harder. It has a certain weight to it. But not the armor of God. It has the opposite effect. It makes standing easier. Not only that, but it also makes standing possible. Equipped with the armor of God, we are able to stand and withstand.

Your enemies will try to floor you. They try to make you submit. They want you to give into popular opinion, to turn your back on the truth of God's Word, or to give in to your sinful desires. There is constant temptation to lie down. Physically standing up is not a challenge for most, but spiritually standing and withstanding is. The only way we can do that is by being equipped in the armor of God. Christ's power equips us. It allows us to withstand anything and everything. We stand in Christ's love and power. That enables you to withstand the evil day.

Stand, then, in His great might,
 With all His strength endued;
 But take, to arm you for the fight,
 The panoply of God,
 That, having all things done
 And all your conflicts past,
 Ye may overcome through Christ alone
 And stand entire at last.

The Lutheran Hymnal 450:3-4

And having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one.

Ephesians 6:15-16

Shielded by Faith

Twice in our series Paul has mentioned the concept of “the whole armor of God”. He stresses not to be merely armored partially. But rather to be completely armored. Each piece of armor is important. If you had forgotten even one piece of this armor, and you went into battle, you would be vulnerable. So what does this armor consist of? Here is the list: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the Gospel of peace, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the Spirit, and the shield of faith.

How important is a shield? Paul says, “Above all, taking the shield of faith.” The shield is very important to our spiritual armor. When you think of a shield, what do you think of? Probably a piece of wood or metal. My mind goes to the television show Star Trek. In that show, a ship would have an invisible energy shield. As long as the shields were up, the hull would take no damage. The shield would absorb the brunt of the attack, for as long as the shield was up and held.

I think that is a good way to picture faith. You cannot see it fully, but you know it’s there. You can only see the fruits that it produces. Faith is our shield that “quenches all the fiery darts of the wicked one.” The question is, “How do we keep our shields up? How do we fully power our faith?” You are refreshing it right now! Your defenses are strengthened by being in the Word. “So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” (Romans 10:17) Faith allows us to grasp all God’s promises. No devilish dart can penetrate the promise that Christ has paid for your sins. Keep that shield up!

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,

Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!

What more can He say than to you He hath said

Who unto the Savior for refuge have fled?

The Lutheran Hymnal 427:1

And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Ephesians 6:17

Wielding the Word

These are the last two pieces of the whole armor of God. It's a helpful way to think about salvation, as a helmet. Wrap your head in the fact that you are saved already. Various things can happen to you, but if you understand that salvation is yours, they really don't matter. Jesus said, "And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand." (John 10:28)

All the pieces of the armor of God are defensive, save for one. A belt, a breastplate, shoes, a shield, and a helmet. All those things work together so that the assaults of the enemy cannot harm us. But we are also given a weapon: the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

When looking to battle the forces of darkness, observe the Master. When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, Satan used several different tactics. They were all defeated. How? "It is written" was the refrain. While the tempter's tactics varied, the counterattack remained the same. Jesus turned to Scripture every time.

The most useful tool for any Christian is the Word of the Lord. It is "living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12) It has as much power today as ever. It is what we base our lives on. It cuts to the heart of the sinner. And it instills new life into saints. This is why we spend so much time in Scripture. It is the difference between victory and defeat. If you wield the Word, you don't just have a fighting chance. The victory is ensured to the one who fights with the Word of God!

Though devils all the world should fill,
All eager to devour us.
We tremble not, we fear no ill,
They shall not overpower us.
This world's prince may still
Scowl fierce as he will,
He can harm us none, He's judged; the deed is done;
One little word can fell him.

The Lutheran Hymnal 262:3

The word of the LORD that came to Joel the son of Pethuel.

Joel 1:1

The LORD Will Roar out of Zion!

This week we will consider the Lord's message for us given through the prophet Joel.

Joel is one of the so-called Minor Prophets; one of the last twelve books of the Old Testament. Because every word of God is pure, the three-chapter book of Joel is no less important for our salvation than the 66-chapter book of Isaiah. The word "minor" only refers to length. All the minor prophets' messages are considerably shorter than those of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel.

The entire message of Joel is the setting off of an urgent alarm. The LORD will roar out of Zion! The action is non-stop because our gracious God never slumbers nor sleeps in His saving work. And since people today are in just as much need of repentance and salvation, the situation described in Joel should not seem foreign to us. The original audience dealt with wars and natural disasters. So do we. The time of Joel was sodden with the sins of drunkenness, adultery, spiritual apathy, and outright idolatry. So is ours.

We know little more of Joel than his father's name, Pethuel. Just like Joel, it doesn't take a famous reputation for God to use each of us humble servants to be the megaphones of His roar from Zion. The Lord roars out His anguish over the harm and damage of sin and calls sinners to repentance. The Lord also roars out the proclamation of the Gospel of free salvation for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord.

God explicitly prophesied in Joel that we Christians will speak His word, so let us learn from Joel just what this roar from Zion is that we will broadcast.

**Ye lands, to the Lord make a jubilant noise; Glory be to God!
Oh, serve Him with joy, in His presence now rejoice;
Sing praise unto God out of Zion!**

The Lutheran Hymnal 44:1

Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is at hand; It shall come as destruction from the Almighty. Joel 1:15

Alas for the Day!

All of God's prophets warn about the Day of the LORD. Joel is no exception. Only the prophet Zephaniah mentions God's warning more frequently. If God repeats something over and over again, we better take notice!

The Day of the LORD is a time of God's judgment. It is a time that can be experienced already in temporal suffering brought about because of sin. Because we are all sinful, we all are caught up in the destruction in one way or another. The people of Joel's day would cry "Alas!" because the Lord would be sending a locust plague to devour the land. After that, an army would come to destroy that same land.

The reason the Lord was sending this judgment was to lead people to repent of the sins. He wants them to turn to Him before the Final Day of the LORD. Every temporal day of judgment—every war, rumor of war, plague, pestilence, or any other sign of the End Times—looks forward to the Final Day of the LORD. The Final Day is the day when Christ will return again to judge the living and the dead.

Jesus told His disciples and us to continue to take these temporal judgments as constant calls to repent. He also comforted them with the promise: "In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." (John 16:33) Since we don't know when Christ will come again, let us live as though the Day of the Lord is always at hand. We can do so by daily repentance and faith. God graciously offers the way of escape by believing in Jesus Christ who was judged already for us on the cross and declared righteous in His resurrection.

Ye sinners, seek His grace
Whose wrath ye cannot bear;
Fly to the shelter of His cross
And find salvation there.

The Lutheran Hymnal 610

So rend your heart, and not your garments; Return to the LORD your God, For He is gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, and of great kindness; And He relents from doing harm. Joel 2:13

Rend Your Hearts!

God can't just tell sinners to repent. He has to teach us to repent. Sinners are always great actors. Mankind has invented all sorts of ways to make it appear that they are sorry for their sins. Tearing one's garment was a common expression of grief. Jesus calls out the hypocrites who twisted up their faces to show how seriously they were fasting. People have and still do practice bodily mutilation to make themselves appear sufficiently sorry for their sins in order to earn God's forgiveness.

These performances might impress the man on the street, but that is only because all he can see is the torn clothes or torn flesh. God looks at the heart. He righteously has no mercy or kindness for a heart that shows no sorrow over sin. He wants to see a heart torn to shreds. A contrite heart is the only sacrifice He requires.

We can only offer ourselves just as we are before God and plead for His mercy. Only then do we find that our Lord is just as He says He is. He is gracious, merciful, patient, and kind. He relents from doing harm because He doesn't want to. He wants all people to be saved. He has provided salvation through the blood of His Son Jesus which washes away our sinful hearts. He gives us a new heart that is whole and righteous before the Father. Let us daily rend our hearts in repentance and turn to the Lord because His promise of salvation stands forever for the sake of Christ.

O Lord, my God, to Thee I pray:
 Oh, cast me not in wrath away!
 Let Thy good Spirit ne'er depart,
 But let Him draw to Thee my heart
 That truly penitent I be:
 O God, be merciful to me!

The Lutheran Hymnal 318:2

And it shall come to pass afterward That I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your old men shall dream dreams, Your young men shall see visions. And also on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days. Joel 2:28-29

I Will Pour out My Spirit

We said before that there is nothing minor about a Minor Prophet's message. The passage above is one proof of that. This prophecy is so big and important that the apostle Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, used it to describe the entire New Testament era in which you and I are still living.

The messengers through whom the Lord roared out from Zion in the Old Testament were a select few. A handful of men was chosen to preach and write down God's word. Worship of God under the old covenant centered around the thin generational line of the Levitical priesthood.

But not anymore! Jesus Christ has risen from the dead and has breathed the Holy Spirit on all who believe. The prophets of the New Testament are men and women, young and old, slave and free, and greatest and least. We all have the command and authority of Jesus to preach repentance and salvation in His name.

Joel also tells us the blessed result of this prophecy's fulfillment: "And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved." (Joel 2:32)

Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord!
 Be all Thy graces now out poured
 On each believer's mind and heart;
 Thy fervent love to them impart.
 Lord, by the brightness of Thy light,
 Thou in the faith dost men unite
 Of every land and every tongue;
 This to Thy praise, O Lord, our God, be sung.
 Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

The Lutheran Hymnal 224:1

The LORD also will roar from Zion, And utter His voice from Jerusalem; The heavens and earth will shake; But the LORD will be a shelter for His people, And the strength of the children of Israel. Joel 3:16

Shelter from the Storms

The locust plague and military invasion that Joel prophesied has come and gone. The prophecy of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit has been fulfilled and is still being fulfilled among us. One prophecy from Joel has yet to be fulfilled. It is the final time when the LORD will roar out of Zion. It is the Judgment Day.

On Judgement Day every person who ever lived will stand before Christ in the “valley of decision” to be judged. (Joel 3:14) Those who refused to repent and turn to the Lord will be condemned to an eternity in hell. Those who did repent and turn to the Lord will be delivered to live in the shelter and strength of the Lord forever in heaven.

Until that day, God grants us enjoyment of some of the rewards of our final judgment during our remaining time on earth (time of grace). Even now we are declared righteous because of Christ. Even now God shelters us from the storms that mark these last days of an evil and perverse generation. Even now and always, God is the strength of the children of Israel (believers).

Now knowing what is to come on the Last Day, we join the Lord’s urgent roar from Zion. Every moment is the right moment to declare to sinners that the Lord alone is the true shelter from every storm. Every storm that comes our way is another reminder to call on the name of the Lord now and be saved. Every unknown we face is a reminder to focus on what we do know: that Christ has died for the sins of the world. All who call on Him will be saved!

For good is the Lord, and His mercy is sure;

Glory be to God!

To all generations His truth shall still endure;

Sing praise unto God out of Zion!

The Lutheran Hymnal 44:4

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith." Romans 1:16-17

A Black Cross

Martin Luther's Seal is a powerful symbol of our Christian faith. The seal was designed for Luther upon the request of his ruler, Duke John Frederick of Electoral Saxony, who had the seal placed on a ring and had the ring delivered to Luther while he stayed at Castle Coburg during the Diet of Augsburg in 1530. Luther was delighted with the seal and declared to his friends that it summarized his entire teaching!

At its center lies a black cross. The color black symbolizes the total depravity of all human beings, for as the Bible clearly states, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) This is true regarding absolutely everyone. There are no exceptions, as we see by observing the world around us. The Scriptures rightly observe: "There is none who does good, no, not one." (Psalm 14:3)

The cross itself symbolizes the tremendous sacrifice that Jesus had to make to save us from the guilt of our many sins and their terrible consequences—enslavement to Satan and punishment in hell! The Bible says that Jesus "redeemed us from the curse of the law" by being cursed Himself and dying on that cross. (Galatians 3:13)

This is the gospel message preserved through and proclaimed by the Reformation. That "gospel of Christ" is powerful, for the Spirit of God uses that message to lead people to repentance, faith, and eternal salvation! It reveals "the righteousness of God" to believers of every generation and assures us that all who believe in Jesus have been justified by God and will live forever!

Jesus, may our hearts be burning with more fervent love for Thee!
 May our eyes be ever turning to Thy cross of agony
 Till in glory, parted never from the blessed Savior's side,
 Graven in our hearts forever, dwell the cross, the Crucified. Amen.

The Lutheran Hymnal 145:3

If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.

Romans 10:9-10

A Red Heart

In Luther's Seal the black cross of Christ lies centered over a red heart. Given the fallen nature of our human hearts, we might assume that the heart would be at least shaded gray, if not black, due to sin. After all, the Bible says: "Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies." (Matthew 15:19) But that would be the human heart by nature in its lost condition. This heart is red and living because it has been rescued from sin by the grace of God through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. This heart is red and living because the Holy Spirit has worked faith within it—faith in Jesus as its Savior and Lord!

The apostle Paul says that when a believer confesses the Lord Jesus and believes in his or her heart that God raised Him from the dead, that believer will be saved. Faith receives the gift of Jesus' own righteousness. When that faith confesses its joy in and reliance upon the Lord Jesus, it is promised the gift of everlasting life in heaven!

Salvation is not and never can be a matter of human works, for no human can be perfect as the law demands. (Matthew 5:48) The Bible so clearly states: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9) The believing child of God who receives that gift by faith, has been purified in the eyes of God. Jesus says that such a heart is blessed and will indeed see God! (Matthew 5:8)

Dear Lord, while we adoring pay our humble thanks to Thee,
 May every heart with rapture say, "The Savior died for me!"
 Oh, may the sweet, the blissful theme fill every heart and tongue
 Till strangers love the charming name and join the sacred song!
 Amen.

The Lutheran Hymnal 363:4-5

Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. John 14:27

A White Rose

The black cross on the red heart is embedded on a white rose in the center of Luther's Seal. The symbolism is that faith in Jesus brings God's children joy, comfort, and above all, peace! This is a peace unlike any the world has to offer. The world speaks of peace often. It offers its many hands in peace, only to take them away as times and circumstances change. Alliances are formed and then broken. People and nations express good intentions, compose impressive treaties, and upon occasion even live in harmony for extended periods of time. Ultimately and inevitably, however, the peace established by the world fades into opposition once again.

Jesus bestows upon us a peace that can never be taken from us. It flows from God's heart into our own as we read and believe the gospel message. It is a peace that was once proclaimed by angelic hosts over the fields of Bethlehem and which is based upon Jesus' triumphant cry, "It is finished!" (John 19:30) It is a peace between God and human beings, which flows from the reconciliation Jesus has accomplished between us. It is a peace that can and is to spread among believers as they, sharing a common faith in Jesus, strive to live and work together in harmony.

Consequently, within this world that can be so very troubling, Jesus urges us not to be afraid. Such fear only disrupts and destroys the peace with which we have been blessed. The Bible assures us that absolutely nothing can separate us from the love our Savior God has for us in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:35-39) Therefore, we can live our lives with confidence and rejoice in the beauty of God's grace, even as we rejoice in the beauty of a white rose!

**Grant us Thy peace throughout our earthly life,
Our Balm in sorrow and our Stay in strife;
Then, when Thy voice shall bid our conflict cease,
Call us, O Lord, to Thine eternal peace. Amen.**

The Lutheran Hymnal 47:4

God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. Ephesians 2:4-7

A Sky-Blue Field

In Luther's Seal the white rose with its heart and cross rests upon a sky-blue field. That sky-blue field represents both faith's present joy in knowing that our future is secure and faith's future fullness of joy to be experienced when we finally arrive in heaven. It is a joy we cannot now fully comprehend or experience, for we are surrounded by the troubles of this earthly life.

In Christ, however, we have begun to experience that joy. We were "dead in trespasses" but were made "alive" again "together with Christ!" We have been saved by God's grace. God, the apostle Paul says, has "raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." That is something we experience only by faith at this point. In the future, God will "show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." He will take us—bodies and souls—to live with Himself in the new creation for eternity!

This we know to be true, for our God is faithful and never lies. Therefore, while at times we struggle in this life being opposed by Satan, this world, and our own flesh, we can live our lives with a quiet joy instilled within our hearts by God's own Spirit. Truly, we can, as Paul encourages us, "rejoice in the Lord always" (Philippians 4:4), for He is always walking with us, always watching over us, and always guiding our paths in accordance with His plan and purpose!

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes,
 Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies.
 Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
 In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me! Amen.

The Lutheran Hymnal 552:8

I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God . . . and the city was pure gold, like clear glass . . . But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light. Revelation 21:2a, 18b, 22-23

A Golden Ring

A golden ring surrounds Luther's Seal and completes it. That golden ring symbolizes the eternal blessedness we will experience in heaven. That blessedness, like gold, is most precious! That blessedness, like a ring, has no end!

God did not create the world to end, but when sin entered this world, its course was set to end. The Bible assures us: "The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up." (2 Peter 3:10)

As God's children, we need not fear that day of destruction, for our future is secure. Jesus revealed in His Revelation that when this world and its works are burned up, God's "New Jerusalem" will arrive, "coming down out of heaven from God." It will be our new home—a home unlike any other! We will not need a "temple" in which to worship our Savior God, for God the Father and God the Son—the Lamb will dwell visibly among us. Our new home will have no need for created bodies of light, for "the glory of God" and "the Lamb" will serve as its eternal illumination!

Jerusalem the golden, with milk and honey blest,
 Beneath thy contemplation sink heart and voice opprest.
 I know not, oh, I know not, what joys await us there,
 What radiancy of glory, what bliss beyond compare.
 O sweet and blessed country, the home of God's elect!
 O sweet and blessed country that eager hearts expect!
 Jesus, in mercy bring us to that dear land of rest,
 Who art with God the Father and Spirit, ever blest. Amen.

The Lutheran Hymnal 613:1, 5

But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only. Matthew 24:36

The Christian's Supply Kit

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provides a list of necessities for a basic disaster supplies kit. Water and food. Radio and flashlight. Batteries. Maps. You name it. In the event of a disaster, natural or otherwise, having a kit on hand helps a person stay prepared in the face of an unexpected and dire situation.

It's not totally unexpected though, is it? We know that a natural disaster could hit at any minute. We know something like a blizzard, twister, or hurricane could strike our homes when the season strikes. Shouldn't we want to be prepared? Even moreso, Jesus says that the final day is imminent. It is coming. If we take comfort in preparedness for any other possibility, shouldn't we want to be prepared for this great day of His return?

Being prepared for Christ's return goes beyond a FEMA list though. The essentials are less reliant on the one who is waiting and solely reliant on the One who is returning. The water you need, dear Christian, is the water your Savior offered at the well (John 4:14). The food you need is the bread of life (John 6:35). Your radio and light are the words of your almighty God (Psalm 119:105). Your batteries are the sanctification afforded to you (1 Corinthians 6:11). Your road map shows a straight and narrow way that points to the Triune God.

Though the day and hour of Christ's return are unknown by all but God, the proper amount of preparation has been provided so you can face it head on. When Jesus comes in judgment on that day, He will not look at you and the things you did or failed to do. When He comes, He will see you clothed in the righteousness He won for you.

**The world is very evil, the times are waxing late;
Be sober and keep vigil, the Judge is at the gate;
The Judge that comes in mercy, the Judge that comes with might;
To terminate the evil, to diadem the right.**

The Lutheran Hymnal 605:1

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night.

2 Peter 3:10

The Christian's Security

There is a warning and a promise in Peter's words here: the day is not here yet, but it will be here soon. If it was soon in the Apostle Peter's day, imagine how close we are to it now!

On occasion, we might be guilty of procrastination. We might put off something that needs to be done. We might reschedule something simply because we do not want to go. You have no doubt noticed in these situations that the chores still need to be done and that the events go on regardless of your attendance.

There is no good in putting off our preparations for the Last Day. The day will come regardless. Peter wrote in the previous verse, "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance." (3:9) Think back to that warning and promise. The warning is that the day is not here yet. The promise is that it will be here soon.

The word "warning" doesn't always indicate something bad. It is the advance notice of a future event. For those still in their sins, it is a warning of impending danger. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matthew 4:17) For those who have been washed of their sin in the blood of the Lamb (Revelation 1:5), it is a warning to stay prepared.

Think about the imagery that Peter uses here. A thief does not call ahead to make an appointment to rob you. The thief sneaks up on you. He catches you unaware. You want to be prepared for such intrusions so that you and your family are protected. Your best and only security comes from Jesus. Though the day will come as a thief, Jesus is no thief. He comes to give, not to take. Find refuge in Him now, and you will have nothing to fear when the day comes unexpectedly.

O Jesus Christ, do not delay, but hasten our salvation;
We often tremble on our way in fear and tribulation.
Then hear us when we cry to Thee;
Come, mighty Judge, and make us free from every evil! Amen.

The Lutheran Hymnal 611:7

“And at midnight a cry was heard: ‘Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!’” Matthew 25:6

The Christian’s Preparedness

I vividly remember my dad grumbling and growling every time we drove by the casino on the way to the city. He grumbled and growled about the crowds there: “They have better places to be!” On more than one occasion he added, “What if Jesus comes back today?”

Excellent question! Where are you right now? What is on your mind and heart? Your answer now might well be the final thing you are occupied with. Who knows when you might breathe your last? Who knows when Jesus will return?

That was the point of His parable of the wise and foolish virgins. The ten of them waited for the wedding, but the wedding wouldn’t start until the bridegroom arrived. The foolish virgins took no oil for their lamps while the wise ones did. As they waited, they grew tired and fell asleep. When the bridegroom was announced, they were told to go out and meet him. Those with no oil asked for more but were not granted any. The door to the wedding was shut in their face. The wise virgins were welcomed and went in when the time had come.

“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming,” Jesus warns. (25:13) The fact of the matter is: Jesus sees you even now. He knows what is on your heart. He knows what you are thinking. Yet, by His grace, you know Him too. You know Him as the One who laid down His life for you. You know Him as the One who loves you, forgives your sins, and leads you into eternal life (1 John 2:12-14). So what are you doing now? You are occupied with the Word and knowing Jesus. That means you are ready. Watch, therefore, for you will know Him even better when that Day comes.

O Lord, keep us ready and come quickly. Amen.

And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever. 1 John 2:17

The Christian's Destination

The most important thing someone can know is that Jesus Christ justified them in the sight of God when He gave up His life on the cross. He has declared you “not guilty” of the sins you have committed. Because of His offering, you have been rescued from the condemnation of hell and have been given eternal life in its place. Because your Savior justified you, you can be certain of your salvation!

We must not lose sight of our sanctification either. “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:10) To sanctify means to “set aside” and “make holy.” Because you are justified, you are now sanctified, and because you are now sanctified, “You are the light of the world.” Jesus instructed His followers, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:14,16)

Many in the world have not heard the good news. They place their trust in fickle idols and earthly matters. The destination they have in mind is either nothingness or based on a merit system. What they imagine cannot compare to the true joys of heaven (Revelation 21, 22). Others in the world have heard the good news and despise it. Their earthly endeavors may seem profitable, but they are missing out on the eternal reward that is waiting for them (Matthew 25:46).

As children of the Most High, let us set our sights on a higher good and focus our works on the love of the One who first loved us (1 John 4:19). We can demonstrate our eternal hope for those whose hope is perishing. This world will not last forever. Jesus said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.” (Matthew 24:35) As one who has been sanctified, may God strengthen you with and through those very words. Christ is coming soon!

**While the wicked are confounded,
Doomed to flames of woe unbounded,
Call me, with Thy saints surrounded.**

The Lutheran Hymnal 607:16

He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming quickly." Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus! Revelation 22:20

The Christian's Certainty

Being ready for Christ's return involves two incentives: one of the law and one of the gospel. On the side of the law, the incentive is that He is coming quickly. On the side of the gospel, the incentive is that He is coming quickly!

The Book of Revelation paints many startling pictures of the end times. For nearly two millennia, people have argued about the meaning of the imagery found within. Yet the book has a simple message that is easy enough for anyone to understand. To borrow the words of another pastor, the message is, "WE WON!" We have won through the Lamb of God who sacrificed Himself in our place. We have won because He took all of our burdens and sins to the cross and put them to death. We have won because He rose again to life and gave us life in doing so.

Even now, when it seems things are out of control and only going to get worse, Jesus assures us that He is with us to the end of the age, that things are most certainly under His control, and that this turmoil we face now is fleeting.

Though many of the visions throughout Revelation may be debated, the law and gospel remain clear. There is condemnation and damnation for those who reject God. When the day of judgment arrives, they will reap what they have sown. That day will be horrific beyond words for them. The call is to change.

But there is forgiveness, salvation, and life for those who are washed in the blood of the Lamb! That day will be the most wonderful, and it will only lead to something greater with each passing moment in eternity. Jesus testifies of these things. He assures you that He is coming quickly to make it so!

Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

**Christ is my everlasting All;
To Him I look, on Him I call;
He will my ev'ry want supply
In time and thro' eternity.**

The Lutheran Hymnal 608:3

I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come.
Isaiah 46:9-10 NIV

The Future is in God's Hands

Just about anything could happen in the world tomorrow: A terrorist attack in some place least expected, an earthquake devastating thousands, a passenger plane exploding in midair. Just about anything could happen in your life tomorrow: Your car breaking down, a loved one suddenly rushed to the hospital, a tree crashing into the side of your house.

People wish they could know the future. Many worry about the future. Certain people claim they can predict the future. However, God alone knows the future. He alone can predict the future. In the Bible He reveals certain future events. Most of these events have already come to pass. Apart from what God has revealed, the future is totally unknown to us. The best mankind can do is make educated guesses about future events.

As Christ-believers we leave the future to God. We learn to face each new day as it comes, trusting in the goodness and grace of our loving Savior God. We know we need not worry about what tomorrow may bring for God will make it all work out for our eternal good (Romans 8:28). We can trust God to care for all our needs today and tomorrow. He cares about the flowers of the fields and the birds of the air, but He cares about us so much more (Matthew 6:25-34).

Finally we remember that Jesus' cross and empty tomb have settled the great issues of our lives. Our sins have all been washed away by Jesus' blood. A place in heaven is waiting for us where, body and soul, we will live with Him forever. As we stay in His Word, we can live in the certainty that our earthly and eternal futures are safe in His nail-scarred hands.

Lord, we know all we need to know about the future. Teach us in faith to leave the details to You! Amen.

Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. Matthew 24:44

No One Knows the Day— Be Ready

“Sometime this weekend,” I informed my son, “we’ll drive out to the disc golf course and play a round.” “When? This weekend?” he asked. “I don’t know,” I said. “It depends on how my work goes.” “Well, Dad, whenever we go, I’ll be ready,” he smiled.

Sometimes we look forward to coming events without knowing exactly when they will happen. We just know we need to be ready for the day whenever it comes. The unknown day may involve a fun activity, like a round of disc golf with my son. Often, however, more serious issues are involved, such as the restaurant owner who knows the health inspector could show up any day.

What about the date of Christ’s Second Coming? Is there any way to know when that will be? You may recall how radio preacher Harold Camping predicted the end of the world to be May 21, 2011 and when that didn’t happen he rescheduled Christ’s arrival for October 21, 2011. This wasn’t the first time that someone has presumed to know when the Last Day will arrive, nor will it be the last. Some are a bit more cautious, however, predicting the year rather than the exact date of Christ’s return. Dates which leaders of the Jehovah’s Witnesses have set for the last year include: 1874, 1878, 1881, 1910, 1914, 1918, 1925, 1975, and 1984.

The Bible is very clear. No one but God knows the day of Christ’s Second Coming. He’s coming when we least expect it (See Acts 1:7; 2 Peter 3:10; Matthew 24:42; Matthew 24:36). Since we don’t know either the day or the year of Jesus’ coming, we need to stay ready every day. We stay ready as we look in repentant faith to the sacrifice Jesus made for all on Calvary’s cross.

Thank you, Jesus, for freely and fully forgiving my sins, and therefore declaring me “good to go,” no matter when You return. Amen.

My kingdom is not of this world. John 18:36

Millennialism

Much of Christianity has been infected with the false belief that when Christ returns he will establish a visible reign on earth for one thousand years. There are many facets to this idea, but the gist of it is that the world will enjoy a golden era of peace and prosperity as Christ and the believers rule from Jerusalem. This false doctrine is known as millennialism.

While Revelation 20 does speak of a 1000 year rule, a careful reading of the chapter clearly shows that it's speaking of souls ruling with Christ. Souls rule in heaven, not on earth. Revelation 20, in fact, says nothing about anyone ruling on earth. What about the reference to the 1000 years? A study of Revelation shows that the book uses numbers in a figurative sense. The 1000 years refers symbolically to the entire New Testament era.

Millennialists also like to cite certain Old Testament prophecies, which they claim point ahead to a future golden era for Israel, which they say will come to pass during the millennium. But a careful reading of the New Testament shows that these "restoration" prophecies were either fulfilled with the establishment of the New Testament Church or will be fulfilled in heaven

In order for the millennialists to keep their story straight, they must have more than one Last Day—referring to both the beginning of the 1000 year rule and the Final Judgment Day.) But an unbiased reading of Scripture shows that there is only one Last Day, a day in which all people will be raised from the dead, judged, and in which the world and universe as we know it will pass away.

Finally, the teaching of a millennium is dangerous to simple faith because it takes one's focus off of Jesus, the forgiveness of sins, and eternal life in heaven. Let us abide in the clear Word of God, which sets our minds on things above, not on things on earth (Colossians 3:1-2).

Come, Lord Jesus, and take us out of this world to our home in heaven! Amen.

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 NIV

A Noisy Rapture

When I was ten years old I remember seeing a scene from the movie “The Late Great Planet Earth,” in which an airplane pilot suddenly disappears from the cockpit of his plane, while his copilot remains. The pilot was raptured, that is, taken up to heaven. One of the events millennialists claim will happen before the mythical 1000 year rule of Christ on earth is a secret rapture. They falsely believe that the believers will be quietly whisked away (“raptured”) seven years before the millennium. The rapture, according to millennial ideas, will then be followed by seven years of tribulation. After that comes the supposed 1000 year rule of Christ on earth.

While our passage from 1 Thessalonians does speak of believers “raptured” up to meet the Lord in the air, there’s nothing secret about it. The passage describes a very noisy event, complete with a loud command, the voice of an archangel, and the trumpet of God. On this day, the dead in Christ (the believers who died before Christ’s Second Coming) will be raised and taken to heaven. The believers who are still alive when Jesus returns will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. The command, the voice, and the trumpet will unmistakably announce that the Lord Jesus has arrived to judge the living and the dead.

The passage is so very clear and all so comforting. Because we believe that Christ died and rose again we look forward to His return, when we will be taken to our heavenly home to live with Him forever. What a joy to know that we will always be with the Lord.

Thank you, Jesus, for taking away my sins and conquering death for me. Thank you for Your Word and Sacrament which sustains my faith until the day of Your triumphant and noisy return. Even so, come Lord Jesus! Amen.

“Surely I am coming quickly.” Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus! Revelation 22:20

Waiting for Jesus

When I was a little child I didn't like it when my Mom and Dad went out for the night and my brothers and I were left with a babysitter. I guess I worried that they might get in a car accident and never return. I remember looking out the back window, and whenever I saw headlights coming down the road I would rush to the front door to see if the car would pull into our driveway. How relieved I was to welcome Mom and Dad back home at last.

I don't have to worry if my mighty Savior God is coming back. Nothing can keep Jesus from returning just as He's promised. Jesus has already taken away all my sins. He's already accomplished His mission to destroy death and win for me a place in my true home above. What He did in living a sinless life, dying a sacrificial death, and rising to life, He did for all. I'm so happy that He's given me faith to believe it through His Spirit and Word. That means I have peace right now to carry me through all of life's struggles, its aches and pains.

Nevertheless, I desperately long to see my Jesus face to face. I can't wait for the day when He dries every tear from my eyes once and forever. I'm praying He'll return very soon! But this doesn't mean I'm just to sit and look up at the sky, doing nothing as I wait for Him. I'm not to wait for Him like I did for my parents when I was a little boy. Rather He wants me to keep one eye on heaven and the other eye on the things He's given me to do while still on earth. He wants me to be busy sharing His gospel of love with other sinners, as well as living for Him, Who loved me and gave Himself for me.

But still I pray: Lord Jesus, come quickly! Oh, do come quickly! Amen.

For I proclaim the name of the LORD: Ascribe greatness to our God. He is the Rock, His work is perfect; For all His ways are justice, A God of truth and without injustice; Righteous and upright is He.” Deuteronomy 32:3-4

Thanks be to God Alone!

I pray that all the readers of today’s devotion have a Happy Thanksgiving! On this special celebration, it is mentally refreshing to look back upon all the wonderful blessings that we are thankful for. Of those blessings, there are many physical blessings that we give thanks for. Even so, as befits the Christian life, we give thanks for all things spiritual as well. Both physical and spiritual kinds of good and perfect gifts come down to us from the Father of Lights. If we give thanks for these gifts that come from one and the same source, who do we give our ultimate thanks to?

Moses the prophet answers that question in his final breaths on Mt. Nebo. As he composes his enriching song, he speaks of the ultimate source of all our good blessings: the Lord. To Him Moses ascribes greatness! The Lord was Moses’ Rock. The Lord blessed Moses throughout his life, giving him the power and gifts to lead the children of Israel. Moses relied on the Lord in all things from parting the Red Sea, to providing manna, to providing deliverance from snakes, and more.

The Lord God is the Rock, the foundation for us too, and His works are perfect. From Him flow all the blessings and works that come to aid us for our good. We rely on God alone to take care of us in all our hardships, physical and spiritual! And so, as we survey throughout this week’s devotions the various blessings that we give thanks for, we first begin with our ultimate blessing that we give thanks for, the Rock and Source of all things perfect: The Lord.

All praise to God, who reigns above, the God of all creation,
 The God of wonders, power, and love, The God of our salvation!
 With healing balm my soul He fills,
 The God who every sorrow stills,
 To God all praise and glory

The Lutheran Hymnal 19:1

The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing. Psalm 145:15-16 ESV

Thank God for the Gifts of the Earth

Then God said, “Let there be Light!” Thanks be to Almighty God for light! Imagine how challenging and frustrating our lives would be without light; the words ‘challenging’ and ‘frustrating’ don’t quite cut it. Perhaps I should use more dire descriptions: being without light wouldn’t only be challenging and frustrating but would also be frightening and stressful. Light may then perhaps be one of the biggest blessings of God’s creation.

As we walk upon God’s green earth day after day, we take in many of His created blessings to our benefit. Not only do we see with the light God created, but we breathe the oxygen He created. We drink the water He created. And with the festival of Thanksgiving as our consideration, our eyes look to God and He certainly gives us our food in due season. By His gracious hand, He copiously showers upon us what we need. He satisfies us, answering our petition to “Give us this day our daily bread.”

In our satisfaction given by our gracious Father, let us always thankfully acknowledge these gifts: “He has given me my body and life, eyes, ears, and all my bodily members, my mind, and all my senses and still keeps them for me. God also preserves me by richly and daily providing clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, spouse and children, land, animals, and all my property and all I need to support this body and life... God does all this because He is my good and gracious Father in heaven, not because of anything I have done to earn or deserve it. For all of this it is my duty to thank, praise, serve, and obey Him.” (Explanation to the First Article, Martin Luther’s Small Catechism, Sydow Edition 2004)

Let all things now living a song of thanksgiving
to God the Creator triumphantly raise
Who fashioned and made us, protected and stayed us,
who still guides us on to the end of our days.
God’s banners are o’er us; His light goes before us,
A pillar of fire shining forth in the night,
Till shadows have vanished and darkness is banished,
As forward we travel from light into light.

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He (Jesus) indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you who through Him believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

1 Peter 1:20-21

Thank God for His Son

Will you be joining the intense shopping sprawl at 4:00 A.M. the morning after Thanksgiving? Perhaps you can imagine the rush of people buying their discount furniture, appliances, electronics, and . . . Christmas decorations. Christmas music may, in fact, already be playing in the stores as this is going on.

As we think of all the things that we are thankful to God for, let us beat out the corporate businesses by having Christmas on our minds before the songs start playing and the trees become discounted. When surveying our list of blessings for which we are thankful, having Christmas in mind early, there is one blessing that takes the top spot on our Thanksgiving list. That blessing is our Savior, Jesus Christ.

God the Father has sent many gifts. We thank Him for being our sole Rock in which we trust. We thank Him for all our physical gifts. Yet, what would God be to us if He never sent His Son? He would be a God far out of reach, for we would be too sinful to reach Him. Our physical gifts would then turn out to be only temporary peacemakers, attempts to ease our minds some before our day of reckoning with an angry God.

Thank God that He planned the blessing of our Savior Jesus long ago. Thank God that He sent Jesus in our flesh to be our perfect representative, to die and take away our sin, and to rise again to show that we are innocent in Him and are adopted as children of God!

**Songs of thankfulness and praise, Jesus, Lord to Thee we raise,
Manifested by the star to the sages from afar,
Branch of royal David's stem, in thy birth at Bethlehem
Anthems be to Thee addressed, God in man made manifest**

The Lutheran Hymnal 134:1

You have multiplied the nation And increased its joy; They rejoice before You According to the joy of harvest, As men rejoice when they divide the spoil. Isaiah 9:3

Thank God for the Gift of Heaven

With Thanksgiving being in late November, the harvest season is practically over. Whether it be a small-scale, personal garden, or a large-scale farming operation, most owners of the land have collected their produce into pickling jars and granary storehouses. Thanksgiving can then be a refreshing reminder that the harvest work is done, as perhaps some of the produce collected may be sitting at the dinner table on Thursday evening.

Whether you yourself are a farmer or belong to a farming household, or you're another fellow citizen that enjoys and appreciates the fruits of the farmers' labor, give thanks that the harvest has been collected! But wait. Who said the harvest was over? Who said that it has even begun? The fruitful ears are still growing.

The harvest of souls is still yet to come. God has yet to take His harvest home. As we enjoy our feasts of God's earthly gifts of food and drink harvested at due time, we can rest with thankful hearts. Because God sent His Son Jesus Christ to redeem us as children of God, we are counted as God's crop, waiting to be harvested. This harvest will come one day when we will be gathered into God's storehouse in heaven! As we await in a painful world, having to grow among tares, we can rest assured and be thankful that one day we will be harvested away from a world of pain to a perfect world of bliss.

God will get this done even if it means raising us from the dead so that with Him, we may live, being perfect and holy. This harvest will come, and because of Christ Jesus' death and resurrection, we get to go to the storehouse of heaven. Thanks be to God, and come quickly, Lord Jesus!

**Even so, Lord, quickly come to Thy final Harvest-home;
Gather Thou Thy people in, free from sorrow free from sin,
There forever purified, in Thy garner to abide.
Come with all Thine angels, come, Raise the glorious Harvest-home.**

The Lutheran Hymnal 574:4

I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the LORD; let the humble hear and be glad. Psalm 34:1-2 ESV

Thank God in All You Do

“Come, Lord Jesus! Be our guest and let these gifts to us be blessed. Oh, give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good, and His mercy endures forever.” I would not be shocked if you said this prayer before your Thanksgiving meal. It certainly is a wonderful prayer. “Oh Give thanks unto the Lord!” Why? “He is good, and His mercy endures forever.” (Psalm 118:1) He has blessed us even though we don’t deserve it. He has given us all the food we don’t deserve, like that turkey on the table. He has been merciful by sparing us from the misfortunate disasters we do deserve, like a pressure cooker explosion.

But in a more dire and deeper way, give thanks to God, for He is good, and His mercy endures forever. God has sent us our heavenly food, the Bread of Heaven, Jesus Christ, to take away our sin. He has given us the seed of the Word, the waters of Baptism, and the meal of the Lord’s Supper to give to you the forgiveness won in Christ. He has also spared us from the judgment’s deadly sentence through the same Savior Jesus and proclaimed it through the same Gospel and Sacraments.

Seeing our good God and His gracious gifts, we now raise our hands, voices, minds, hearts, possessions, and anything else that God has given us to glorify Him in our heartfelt Thanksgiving. In a beautiful voice, an artistic paintbrush, a sharp mind, vehement strength, abundant finance—in whatever it is we have been blessed with, we give back to God, pointing to Him and saying, “This is the God who created me and redeemed me! This is My God and Lord! Praise be to Him!”

**Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done, in whom His world rejoices
Who from our mother’s arms hath blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today**

The Lutheran Hymnal 36:1

Grace to you and peace from...Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Revelation 1:4-6

Jesus Is Winning!

The story goes that the Dean of a small Lutheran Seminary entered the school's gymnasium years ago to find the school janitor sitting in the bleachers reading his Bible. The Dean asked him, "What are you reading?" The janitor responded, "The Book of Revelation." The Dean then asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The janitor replied, "I don't understand everything, but I know that Jesus is winning!"

The Revelation was given by Jesus to John to share with Christians undergoing persecution in the late first century. These early Christians were being hard pressed by unbelieving neighbors and unrelenting government officials. Some Christians were being imprisoned, while others were being killed. What were they to think? What were they to do? Had Jesus deserted them? Had He gone back on His promise to be with them always? (Matthew 28:20) Were their fervent prayers simply falling on deaf ears? (Psalm 50:15) Should they remain faithful to Jesus, or should they compromise their faith...perhaps even giving it up entirely?

The message John delivered to these beleaguered Christians was, "Do not despair, for Jesus is winning!" Jesus will keep His promises to you, for He is "the faithful witness!" You need not fear persecution or even death, for Jesus is "the firstborn from the dead." Jesus is "the ruler over the kings of the earth!" Jesus has loved you and cleansed you with "His own blood." Jesus has made you "kings and priests to His God and Father." Therefore, give Jesus glory as your Savior and Lord "forever and ever!"

This was true in the first century. This is true for us today. Rejoice, therefore, in Christ's victory shared with us!

Lord Jesus, may Your name be hallowed by us, Your kingdom come to us, and Your will be done among us. Amen.

I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a scroll...sealed with seven seals. ... No one...was able to open the scroll. ... In the midst...stood a Lamb as though it had been slain.... He came and took the scroll. ... And they sang a new song, saying: 'You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth. Revelation 5:1, 3, 6-7, 9-10

Jesus Controls All of History!

Jesus is winning! John brought that message to those suffering persecution in his day. It is intended to encourage all those who have suffered persecution since then. Throughout the Revelation, we are presented with visions of heaven to calm our troubled spirits. In this vision a scroll is seen in God's hand. No one could open it until Jesus, the Lamb, took the scroll. The hosts of heaven broke into a "new song" praising Jesus' past and future works. Jesus is the One who was "slain" but now lives! Jesus is the One who has "redeemed" the souls of departed saints from "every tribe and tongue and people and nation" by His blood! Jesus is the One who has made them "kings and priests," and who will "reign" with Him on the new earth to come! (Revelation 21:1)

But what does the "scroll...sealed with seven seals" in Jesus' hands represent? That scroll represents all of history guided by the hands of Jesus. Jesus possesses all authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18b). Jesus, who redeemed us by His blood on Calvary's cross, was raised from the dead, now sits at God's right hand exercising power over everyone and everything. He is the "head over all things to the church" (Ephesians 1:20-22). We need never fear, for Jesus controls all of history!

Dear Jesus, calm our fears and remove our concerns as we approach the troubles that confront us in this world, for we know that You control all of history for our ultimate blessing. Amen.

Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads. Revelation 14:1

Jesus Stands with Every One of His Followers!

Life in this world is difficult and scary at times. Just as this was true for the Christians of the late first century, it is also true for Christians in our twenty-first century. It is easy to become disheartened by the troubles that confront us and to feel both forgotten and forsaken! One of the greatest comforts for Christians undergoing trials is knowing that Jesus is always with us. Jesus promises, "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). That truth is affirmed in our verse cited from the Revelation.

In the Revelation Jesus reveals His enemies and speaks of the troubles that arise for His believing followers. Jesus' revelations are frightening, yet amidst the many enemies mentioned and troubles described, Jesus reassures His followers of His constant presence among them and the security He provides for them. In Revelation 7 and here again in Revelation 14, Jesus speaks of the "144,000." Who are these people? They are the total number of Jesus' followers at any given time living on this earth. They are the total number of believers in His Holy Christian Church on earth!

"144,000" is a symbolic number representing completion: $12 \times 12 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10$! The Lamb of God is standing on Mount Zion among all believers and beside each believer in His Church on earth. There is not a single believer who will ever be overlooked or abandoned by Jesus. Their heavenly Father's name has been placed upon their foreheads. None will ever be forgotten!

What a comfort that is for Christians suffering ridicule here in the United States, violent attacks in Nigeria, imprisonment in China, or execution in North Korea! Jesus stands with every one of His followers!

Dear Jesus, please remove all fear from my heart by reminding me that I am one among Your "144,000" followers in this world today...blessed by Your presence and protected by Your power. Amen.

I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. ... On His head were many crowns. ... He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses. Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword. ... And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. Revelation 19:11-16

Jesus Is Our “King of Kings and Lord of Lords!”

God’s Word informs us that “in the last days perilous times will come” (2 Timothy 3:1). They surely have come! Persecution of Christians is on the rise. More Christians are dying today for their faith than ever before. Should we panic, hide, or give up confessing our faith? Will evil ultimately overcome good? The answer is, “No!”

Jesus, who is “called Faithful and True,” will return to judge the world in righteousness! Jesus is here depicted as riding on “a white horse.” On His head are “many crowns.” He wears “a robe dipped in blood.” His name is “The Word of God.” Out of His mouth comes “a sharp sword” with which to “strike the nations.”

Some believe that when Jesus returns there will be a pitched battle between Him and His enemies. This is not true. The battle has already been won! The blood on Jesus’ robe is the blood He shed on Calvary’s cross, so that He might cry out, “It is finished!” (John 19:30) Jesus has already been crowned. He rules from God’s right hand (Ephesians 1:20). His Word is the sharp sword by which all will be judged (John 12:48). Jesus’ armies—all us believers—will be “clothed in fine linen, white and clean”—the clothing worn to a victory celebration!

There is no reason to panic, or hide, or to stop confessing Jesus’ name. Jesus is our “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS!”

Dear Lord Jesus, give us courage to confess Your name and confidence in the fact that You will return in victory! Amen.

“Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come... I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. ... And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.’” Revelation 19:7; 21:2-4

Jesus Will Be Our Bridegroom!

After creating Adam, God declared, “It is not good that man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18a). He then created Eve, brought her to Adam, and established the bonds of marriage (Genesis 2:21-24). Marriage is used often in Scripture to illustrate our relationship with God and with Jesus.

A couple’s wedding day is among the most important days of their lives. Anticipation of that day may begin long before a future spouse is known. Preparations for that day begin well before it arrives. When the day comes, promises are made. Good days and bad days will inevitably follow, but, with God’s help, couples can strive to persevere and remain faithful to each other. They can forgive, uplift, encourage, and love each other until death parts them. Sadly, in this world, this does not always happen.

The Revelation presents God’s believing children as a “bride adorned for her husband,” and Jesus as that groom awaiting His bride. That blessed relationship will last throughout all eternity, with God promising to be with us always! In heaven there will only be good days. God will “wipe away” our every tear. There will be “no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying.” There will be “no more pain,” for all the things that cause us sorrow in this world will “have passed away.”

That is the future Jesus promises us. We will be His bride, and Jesus will be our groom!

Lord Jesus, help us to remain faithful to You now, so that we might enjoy Your continued faithfulness throughout all eternity. Amen.

Christ has arisen; He sets us free;
Alleluia, to Him praises be.
Jesus is living! Let us all sing;
He reigns triumphant heavenly King.

Let us sing praise to Him with endless joy;
Death's fearful sting He has come to destroy.

Our sin forgiving, alleluia!
Jesus is living, alleluia!

Lutheran Service Book 466



