S
cripture speaks to us as strangers and sojourn-
ers by means of signs and wonders that foretell
and bring the coming of Christ. On our pilgrim
journey toward our heavenly destination we will en-
counter these signs and wonders. We note several
of them that will take place in the world of men and
in creation.

The signs that take place in the world of men
include wars and rumors of wars. Even a cursory
reading of any period in history will reveal that it
is marked by threatened or actual wars. Wars are
by no means a new or unusual phenomenon. Old
Testament Israel was at war with its surrounding
nations throughout much of its history. If you open
the Bible at random, you will likely find the account
of some sort of conflict. In the history of the world
after Christ’s first coming, warfare marked the his-
tory of the world. The wars were so numerous that
it is almost impossible to list them all. In the history
of the United States there have been many wars,
notably the Civil War, two world wars, the Korean
War, the Vietnam War, and most recently the Gulf
War, which is still having repercussions today. Cur-
tently the United States is the object of unrelenting
terrorist attacks; we only need to think of the Taliban
and of ISIS, the most virulent terrorist organization
in the world today.

It is interesting to note that many of the wars in
the history of the world have centered on the Middle
East. This began already with the Crusades mounted
by the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages; from approximately AD 1100 to AD 1300 there

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Mark H. Hoeksema

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Matt Rutgers
PO Box 37
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Beacon Lights is published monthly by the
Federation of Protestant Reformed Young People’s
Societies. Subscription price is $15. Please send
all business correspondence, address changes, and
subscriptions to the business office.

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were roughly fifteen crusades, depending on which historian is doing the counting. All of them focused on conquering the Muslims and retaining possession of the Middle East, especially the Holy Land.

Since the formation of Israel in 1949, the Middle East has been the scene of almost constant conflict between Israel and the Arab states. There are several aspects to this. Disputed is Israel’s right to exist as a nation; the Arabs are intent on wiping Israel off the map. There is conflict between Judaism and the Muslim religion, with Western nations inserting Christianity into the mix. And then there is oil, the factor that drives the constant tension with which we are all familiar.

What does scripture’s teaching about wars and rumors of wars portend regarding the end time? Surely the history of war is universal and not limited to the Middle East. Besides, we cannot know the future, since none of us is a prophet, and scripture does not reveal the details of this future sign. Yet if we follow the pattern of history, as we should, is it not reasonable to think that future wars in the end time will continue to center on this region of the world that has played such a large role in history?

As strangers and sojourners we look for the heavenly kingdom. For this reason we must be attuned to events in the world around us, through which we must travel toward that kingdom. We must therefore recognize this sign as bringing the kingdom of Christ.

Wars and rumors of wars have their purpose in preventing the premature coming of antichrist. Antichrist requires world-wide unity of the nations. As long as there is constant war on earth, he cannot come. But when wars diminish, come he will.

Other notable signs that we as strangers and sojourners must know are upheavals in creation, the physical world in which we live. These include earthquakes, famines, and pestilence, or as Mark 13:8 calls them, “troubles,” as well as signs in the celestial bodies.

Earthquakes are terrifying because they affect the basis of our lives. What is firm and immovable, except the ground on which we stand? That is, until an earthquakes comes. When the ground itself quakes and shakes, causing terrific damage, how can we not be afraid?

Earthquakes in scripture are associated with the upheaval that will occur at the very end of time and that will bring Christ’s final coming (Heb. 12:26): “Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven.” When we experience earthquakes, we recognize them as Christ’s footsteps shaking the solid ground, and we know that he is coming soon.

Famines and pestilence are also signs of his coming. We all know what famine is: the lack of ability to grow crops, which results in a lack of food. We are all familiar with the chronic famines in Africa: too many people, not enough food. Famines, often associated with wars, also serve to prevent the premature coming of antichrist because as long as famines continue, he is unable to realize his kingdom of prosperity.

Another sign is pestilence. The word means an epidemic, a highly infectious and deadly disease, such as the Ebola virus that recently wreaked havoc in West Africa. Also, pestilence serves to prevent the premature coming of antichrist, because as long as there are diseases that cannot be eradicated, his goal of heaven on earth cannot happen.

How do we connect these signs in creation with the coming of Christ? How are they causative? Why is the physical creation damaged and ultimately destroyed?

The answer is that creation, with man at its head, is an organic unity. Herman Hoeksema (Behold, He Cometh, 245) explains this eloquently and clearly in describing the destruction of the kingdom of antichrist:

The stability of the material universe was the presupposition of the kingdom of the world which they [the wicked] intended to establish. They were to build up an imitation kingdom, a kingdom of bliss and righteousness and justice and peace and of material blessedness. That was their purpose, and that was their striving. And they attempted to accomplish all this without Christ Jesus. They never believed that Christ was King. They never knew that He had the principle of His spiritual kingdom already realized in the world and in the hearts of His people. They laughed at the idea that this world was principally wicked and that heaven and earth would pass away. And therefore the supposed eternal stability of the material universe was the basis of their hope. This hope was now frustrated completely and in a moment. The whole universe seems to pass away. The heavens and the earth are shaking. They cannot account for it. Human wisdom is too small, and human science cannot explain the shake-up of the physical universe. It is beyond their comprehension. Human strength now avails nothing. They have been able to do great things.
They ruled over the elements, and they were in power over the sea and the land and the air. But all these things are beyond them now. Nothing can avail. They are overcome. And therefore two facts are now powerfully impressed upon their unbelieving minds, namely: that the very basis of their imitation kingdom is going to destruction, and second, that the kingdom of Christ shall prevail. They realize that their bitterest enemy, the King of heaven and earth, he whom they have pierced, is about to have the complete victory.

The rise and reign of antichrist is one of the clearest signs of the end time of which we as strangers and sojourners ought to be aware. We all have a general understanding of the antichrist, but let’s remind ourselves regarding his identity and his coming in relation to the kingdom of Christ, for they are inseparable, according to 1 John 2:18: “Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time.” Who or what is antichrist?

Scripture gives the answer in various places. The term antichrist is used only four times in scripture (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7). The “anti” in the word has a double meaning: it can mean “instead of,” or it can mean “against,” so that the idea is that antichrist is against Christ as well as attempting to replace Christ. Thus his name indicates the character and purpose of antichrist. He means to replace Christ by opposing him and establishing the kingdom of darkness in opposition to the kingdom of light. Both of these meanings are present in 2 Thessalonians 2:4, where Paul describes antichrist as one “who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped.”

There has been difference of opinion regarding the precise identity of antichrist. Some have a somewhat abstract view that antichrist is some sort of principle or philosophy that permeates and determines the actions of mankind. While there is some truth in this, antichrist is more than a determining but abstract philosophy. Some of our church fathers identified antichrist with papal Rome and even with a particularly wicked pope, of which there were many throughout history. But it is preferable to say that there are aspects or elements of antichrist in the papacy, which is why our fathers would call the pope the antichrist. Others think that the antichrist will be a group of people or a committee who will run the world—an oligarchy. Perhaps because in scripture the word is singular, most are of the opinion that antichrist will be an individual who will rule the entire world both politically and religiously.

The rise and rule of antichrist are important elements for us as strangers and sojourners, according to scripture. So important and necessary is he that Christ cannot come until antichrist first comes, as Paul teaches in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, where he says that the final day of the Lord will not come until “that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition.”

The spirit and power of antichrist in its ultimate manifestations must become crystal clear. This is the reason that his number is 666, the number of man (Rev. 13:18), and the number for which we as strangers and sojourners must look as we stand for the kingdom of Christ in opposition to the man of sin.

Antichrist will come in two ways: by means of the great apostasy and by means of the great tribulation. In his teachings Jesus connects these two (Matt. 24:9–12, 21–24; Mark 13:9–22). These means deserve our attention because they affect us and will increasingly affect us as we walk our sojourner’s pilgrimage as the people of God in a wicked world toward our heavenly destination.

Jesus teaches clearly (Mark 13:10) that the gospel must first be published among all nations. Immediately connected with this universal spread of the gospel are the great apostasy and the great tribulation (Matt. 24:10–12).

The great apostasy will take place in the sphere of the church, which exists through the preaching of the gospel. We know from scripture, however, that what is called the church is not the true church. There is always the true church, the elect, and the false church, which is only formal and outward. The persecution of the church by antichrist will serve to distinguish sharply between the true church and the false church, which will apostatize under the pressure of this persecution. There will be a falling away from the church, as Paul calls it in 2 Thessalonians 2:3. As Jesus said (Matt. 24:12), “And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold.”

The question to you as young strangers and sojourners is this: Will you remain faithful to Christ, or will you apostatize? As time goes on and the signs of the end time become increasingly clear, you will have to face this question. What will your answer be?

Closely connected with the great apostasy is the great tribulation. There have been many tribulations in the history of the church, many of them severe, but
none like the persecution of the church in the end time. Matthew 24:21–22 describes the intensity of this persecution: “For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect’s sake those days shall be shortened.” Revelation 13:16–17 describes the extent of this persecution: “and he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads: And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.” These verses clearly teach that it will be impossible to obtain the basics of life—food and drink, clothing and shelter—without the permission of antichrist by means of his mark in their right hands or in their foreheads.

There has been a great deal of speculation regarding the nature of this mark, but one thing is certain: the ability to buy and sell will be determined by a prominent means of easily knowing one’s allegiance or lack of it to antichrist. This is clear from a simple example: if you get a tattoo on your forehead or on your right hand (most people are right-handed), you can easily be identified.

This mark, however, does not necessarily have to be a literal insignia. While we cannot know for certain its exact nature and perhaps do not need to know, I submit that the mark of antichrist already exists—at least in theory and possibility. I am thinking of computers and other electronic devices, which are now world-wide. The infrastructure and technology already exist. All that remains is for a person or a power to gain control of this technology and use it for nefarious purposes.

An illustration of what form the mark of the beast could take is the social engineering of Singapore, which in some ways is far ahead of the situation in the United States (I am indebted to Mr. Aaron Lim for this information). All Singaporeans have and must carry a national identity card similar to a Social Security card in the United States. The information on this card includes name, race, date of birth, country of birth, address, and fingerprint. Singapore passports are chipped, so that the authorities can quickly pinpoint the location of the owner anywhere in the world by means of GPS technology.

This example should give us pause when we think of the increase of knowledge and abilities that exist already today.

What should you as young strangers and sojourners take away from all of this? Antichrist is coming, and he is not far distant. The signs of the great apostasy and the great tribulation are already beginning to take place. And if you listen carefully, you can hear Christ’s footsteps in these signs.

Listen carefully. Be watchful. Be faithful and strong in the Lord. And lift up your heads, for your redemption is drawing nigh.

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Truth vs. Error

**Christian Patriarchy Life**

The Christian Patriarchy (CP) lifestyle was born in the home school movement during the 1980s as a reaction to the increasing worldliness of the church world that the people were a part of. Aside from promising to improve society so that it can be a fit place to rear up future Christian generations, their form of OT patriarchal hierarchy and clearly defined roles is reassuring to parents within the movement. Parents are taught that this secure arrangement will bless and guard their children from the evils of materialism, feminism, and immorality, as well as from the influence of lukewarm Christianity. A few in the movement are not much different from regular conservative Christians with an overemphasis on headship that affords the husbands and fathers some excessive control. However, most are extreme, maintaining a tight control over several generations in the name of headship and fatherly duty.

The leaders in the CP movement rely on the home school community to further their political goals and theological ideas because they do not form their own denomination. A large percentage
of home schoolers are not part of CP, but almost all of those in CP are avowed home schoolers who insist that home schooling is the only truly biblical, God ordained way to educate children. They will not go so far as to say that Christian day schools are a sin, but because of their interpretation of texts in Deuteronomy, they come very close to it when they insist that even all earthly, academic education is only their sole calling to accomplish as the parents. They contend that day schools of any kind erode the family structure, which they consider to be the only structure blessed by God, and that home schooling protects their children from being led astray by lax, apathetic Christians. Doug Wilson is the only one I found so far who is becoming involved with CP and currently advocates private Christian education over home schooling.

The gender roles and behavioral rules promoted by CP are strictly adhered to. For them, male authority is all-encompassing and often includes micromanagement of wives and children. The biblical calling for wives to submit is turned into a command to men for rule beyond what is authorized in the Bible. The family unit becomes a theocracy where father’s word is law as if it were God’s word. Numerous testimonies from former members of CP consistently describe the beliefs of the movement and how it affects the families.

For most in CP, their theology in practice means that all men have rule over all women, not just husbands over their own wives. Some will go so far as to address a woman only through her husband. It means that women cannot work outside the home for any reason or be in business, and many do not vote. Women should pursue only domestic things and should not be in a position of leadership over men in business or politics. Adult men should never serve or work under a woman or be instructed by one. They teach that the value of a woman before God is only in bearing children and serving their husbands. This is a high calling, but not a woman’s value before God. Many childless couples feel they have no place and eventually leave the movement.

Total submission becomes critical for the wives and daughters of CP. They stress a form of female submission that allows for no questioning of the decisions or rules of the household heads. A Fundamentalist Baptist writer from their midst named Dr. Jack Hyles stated, “A woman has no rights except to submit to her husband.”

This saying is eerily similar to a Muslim saying, “A woman’s heaven is beneath her husband’s feet.” Women within CP become compelled to express their love for God by the depth, breadth and micro-completion of their submission to men, as well as the bearing of as many children as physically possible. This includes exaltation of any personal suffering that their submission incurs. This absolute and unquestioning submission is the measure of their strength of faith, and many purposely seek to endure great suffering to prove (strengthen by trial) their faith within their own hearts. Though we believe that beauty and spiritual strength comes from the sufferings in life, we do not purposely seek out, create, or subject ourselves to suffering or make it into an idol. We are not called to glorify suffering by cultivating it in that way.

Unmarried adult women are subject to their father’s authority no matter what their age is, and no daughter should leave home until married. If they remain single, they are expected to continue to serve the family and forgo personal pursuits. There is a great extolling of the obedience of daughters who depend on their fathers to choose their husband for them. Courtship is the process to be used in order to secure the blessing of God for the resulting marriage, since they believe that dating is a recipe for divorce in their children’s marriages. There is an inordinate pressure for marriage that is placed on all boy-girl relationships. Being alone or unchaperoned as a couple, handholding, hugging, and kissing outside of marriage are considered sinful activities. They teach that it is the only and ultimate purpose for girls to grow up to be the helpmeet of a man; and the rest of their ideology distorts their definition of helpmeet into unbiblical servitude.

Higher education is discouraged as unimportant for girls unless it will make them better homemakers. Sons are to remain under their father’s jurisdiction until they are “released.” All children are to express honor to their parents by seeking their counsel and blessing throughout their adult and even married lives. Their idea is that God commands fathers to rule through the generations. Young people are to promote the family unit to the denial of their own unique, God-given identity. Conformity within each family is exacted. The preparation of the country for the kingdom of Christ, as well as the preservation of the families, is at stake for them. Honor of parents is distorted into expecting young people to be what
the parents and grandparents decide they should be. This is a misuse of parental authority. Christ taught men to leave their parents and cleave to their wives and to make a new family nucleus rather than a continuous multi-generational dynasty.

Outsiders are usually impressed with the conservative look and wholesome behavior of the entire family and especially the children. It is appealing to see how the children put the family first and are so obedient. They appear to be the ideal that we wish our own families could be like. However, the young people are so busy fulfilling their role in the family that when they come to “years of discretion,” they are almost unable to function apart from their parents. Many become crippled Christians. Jesus taught us to follow him and him only. If our believing parents provide a good path for us to walk in also, that is a blessed thing, but following them in every example simply because they are one’s parents is not the teaching of the Bible. A parent’s task is not to teach their children to follow them, but to point them to the Savior so that the youth learn to look to Jesus for all their needs. God gives each generation unique challenges and opportunities that parental examples may not be able to answer.

Family members in CP believe that keeping obedience to the God-ordained roles as defined by CP will attain for one’s family a blessing from God that is special or higher than the blessing that an average Christian can expect to receive. Obedience maintains the family’s covenant with God, so a disobedient family member could doom them all. This is why shunning becomes part of their system as a form of discipline. As Rushdooney taught, the “family unit is one’s best church.” Therefore the keys of the kingdom, given to the apostles for use in the church, fall into the possession of the family and are wrongly applied in order to keep their family unit pure. They also teach that obedience to all father-authority is true spiritual life. This teaching creates an omission of the NT truth that spiritual life comes through the preached word. This is necessary because they replace the instituted church with their extended families and fellow CP followers and many home-churches for purity’s sake. The godly roles they define are presented as being for God’s glory and Jesus’ kingdom, but they move the pure preaching and the cross out of the picture. The family becomes the end all and be all of their devotion. They believe that they live a more holy obedience to the scriptures than other Christians who are either complacent or ignorant of the truths of CP, and this gives them a condescending air towards other Christians. They forget that even a holy life is a gift from God.

CP goes against what the Catechism teaches about sin and salvation when they teach that every human problem is caused when someone steps out of the ordained roles and “that which is inferior and subordinate refuses to submit to that which is stronger and superior.” The cure is a re-establishment of the natural, God-ordained order. This raises their roles to the level of a doctrine. Personal shortcomings or failures in relationships are remedied with the stronger application of their theology instead of with pastoral care. An example of this would be that if there were marriage problems, including abuse and infidelity, it is a result of the wife’s not submitting enough, and she is simply encouraged to go home and try harder. Since for men the role of husband and father is often blurred, encouragement of the husband’s marital responsibility is minimal and rare. In CP, the man is the head of his own house and more under the jurisdiction of his father than any instituted church; one can see the potential for danger and oppression in this system where accountability is limited and shared with only other like-minded men. Some extremists in CP use corporal punishment on their wives. Many also rely on written guides that describe various rebellions against the father’s rules with step-by-step ways to handle the various offenders to restore them to compliance. Some also teach that the husband is his wife’s mediator and he somehow is actually supposed to “wash her with the Word.” Many men in CP will not abide anything less than a smile from their wives or daughters at all times. An unhappy countenance can get a woman put under discipline within their group and even get her shunned, thereby jeopardizing her own salvation. Outsiders often comment that whatever CP is, it cannot be a bad situation because the women always look so happy. Many do not realize that the women do not dare to appear remotely unhappy, especially in public.

It is wise to be careful when reading books by CPs, most notable leaders which include but are not limited to Steven Wilkins, Doug Phillips, Bill Gothard, Geoff Botkin, Michael Pearl, R. C. Sproul Jr., and Doug Wilson, who seems to be joining the movement, although his earlier writings do not evidence much of CP. Some women authors used by CP to
promote their ideology include Helen Andelin, Marlene Evans, Cindy Schaap, Elisabeth George, Martha Peace, Debi Pearl, and Elisabeth R. Handford. Their most public figures are the Duggar family with their self-asserted TV ministry, website, and blog.

CP is the ditch opposite feminism on the road of faith and life and like Aristotle, it teaches that women are unfit for any authority or leadership of any kind by virtue of their emotionality, weakness, and susceptibility to deception. This is not how we are called to view or treat the regenerated and redeemed, adopted daughters of God who have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them. By the work of Christ on the cross and the power of the preached Word, the Genesis curse is lifted from women in Christ just as it has been lifted from men in Christ. We live to Christ not through a role but as redeemed individuals with a path of discipleship that God sets for each of us.

Why should you care about this little cult-like group out there? The appeal that their doctrines make to our natural mind is one reason. Aristotle’s philosophies prevailed for centuries for the same reason; it makes sense to our natural human mind. The Bible always challenges us to think like God instead of like men, and CP is carnal patriarchy propped up by erroneous interpretations of scripture and self-labeled as God-ordained. Another reason is that when these people do join a church, they gravitate to conservative Calvinistic churches such as ours. Furthermore, since we are conservative, we may find ourselves being accused of this mindset. We should know what this is so that we can answer this error. As more of our members opt for home schooling, whether by necessity or preference, we should be aware of this group. We can like what we see and even want to emulate what they do, but we should understand the doctrines they live by and what motivates their outward lifestyle. We could be unguarded when considering their admirable outward walk and begin to adopt for truth their life-expression of things like headship and submission, authority and honor. We could be lured into believing that the gospel message is indeed wrapped up in living a God-ordained role and fail to present and witness the message of the cross and of Christ’s work of mercy and love there for his people. When we encounter these people and hear them use familiar terms, we should be ready to challenge their meanings and speak to them of the Bible’s true meaning for marriage and families and the calling of believers to repent and believe in Christ only for their salvation. We could talk to them about why obedience is thankful service to God rather than an OT yoke.

Last, I think a danger that they represent for us is their exaltation of family. We dearly love our families and the idea of the line of generations, and we should; but we may not make idols of our families. I also know that Luther referred to his family as his “little church.” CP takes that idea and defines church differently from what the apostles developed in the NT and makes their clans the true church. Aside from OT Israel, there is always a difference between earthly families and the family of God. The Bible is very clear that we are to love the family of God, and that family is found in the local instituted church. We are to love it more than life itself, family or friends. We may be called to live far away from loved ones for the good of the church or even to forsake our unrepentant earthly families or friends. We are to desire that our right hand cease to work properly if we ever forget to love the family of God above all else. As we may find ourselves encountering some of CP’s members, we should be ready to witness to them the message of the mercy found in the cross of Christ.

Brenda is a member of Hudsonville Protestant Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Michigan.

Ask Schuyler

Question for Schuyler

“How should we treat a friend or family member with depression?”

Depression is more than an occasional feeling of sadness. We all have days when we wake up not feeling our best, tired, moody, or irritable. Depression is
a debilitating condition in which a feeling of sadness persists for a considerable period of time. Some of the symptoms of depression are a lack of energy, a disinterest in the things of life (perhaps what used to give pleasure no longer does so), a paralyzing sense of fear and a general feeling of sadness. Depression can even have physical symptoms such as heart palpitations and headaches. Depression often makes a person unable to concentrate, unable to work, or unable to function in life.

To make matters worse, no one knows for sure the cause of depression. Some depression is thought to be a chemical imbalance in the brain. There are various hormones in the brain which regulate mood or happiness levels. When they become imbalanced, depression may be the result. That kind of depression may (or may not) respond to medication designed to restore the balance. Other depression is (an often improper or inordinate) reaction to trauma, such as grief, stress, postnatal depression, post-traumatic stress syndrome, depression because of unemployment, marriage difficulties, family difficulties, relationship break up, etc. Any negative event, if not properly processed, can lead to depression. There probably are spiritual causes of depression also. There can be no doubt that sin is a factor in depression. That does not mean, of course, that depression is God’s punishment for a specific sin, but depression is part of life in this sinful world. And depression can be a sinful response to affliction. Since the exact causes of depression are unknown, there is no known cure, and treatment options vary in their success rates.

How should we respond?

Sometimes, our reaction to another person’s depression is impatience. “Why can’t he snap out of it?” “Why doesn’t she get over it?” “Pull yourself together!” Never utter those words to a depressed person, even when you become frustrated! A depressed person simply cannot pull himself together or get over it. How he wishes that he could!

A depressed family member or friend, especially a fellow saint with depression, is a cast down or disquieted soul (Ps. 42:5, 11; 46:5). Such a saint needs compassion. Such a saint is afflicted, and how do we treat afflicted saints? We pray for them. We visit them. We help them. We pray with them. We read scripture to and with them. We encourage them. In many ways, we do this with depressed saints, who have a particular kind of affliction.

Depression can often respond well to counseling. Therefore, it is important to encourage a depressed saint to consult his pastor or a Christian counselor. They may be able to identify the underlying cause, and they will apply the comfort of the gospel to the broken hearted. The depressed saint is a “bruised reed” whom Christ will not break (Matt. 12:20). You, his concerned friend or family member, must remind and assure him of that.

A depressed saint often feels hopeless, is very quickly overwhelmed, and needs constant assurance and encouragement. When he cannot go on, you must bear his burdens (Gal. 6:2). When he cannot read, you should read to him. When he cannot pray, you should pray with him and for him. When he expresses despair, gently remind him of the promises of the gospel. When he lashes out in anger, gently rebuke and admonish him, and forgive him. Encourage him to take little steps. Go for walks with him. Take him out for coffee. Go swimming with him. Play a game with him. Give him your time. Include him in your life in little things. But do not expect him to do too much too soon, or you will add to his stress and overwhelm him.

The greatest fear of a depressed person is often, sadly, a self-fulfilling prophecy. He fears that he will drive others away, even as he pushes them away. A depressed person needs to know that you understand and sympathize. He needs to know that you are there for him. He already feels that he has let everyone down, that he is a burden on his friends and family, and therefore his reaction could well be to isolate himself further. When he does that, draw him out (gently). Include him. Let him know that he is important to you. Greet him. Show him love. None of this is easy, because the depressed person may not respond to your love, and he may even resist your love. You may become weary with loving him and feel like giving up. If the love seems one-sided, let it be one-sided. Your calling is not to be loved, but to love. “Charity [love] suffereth long, and is kind…[love] beareth all things, believeth all things, endureth all things” (1 Cor. 13:4, 7).

Schuyler
Hello from the Federation Board. We are looking forward to another year working for the spiritual welfare of the church’s young people.

Southeast PRC hosted the 2015 convention in Hillsdale, Michigan. At the convention, delegates from our churches elected into office new members willing and ready to serve the Young Peoples’ societies in their respective duties on the Federation Board. The newly elected members are Taylor Dykstra (Vice-President), Joel Langerak (Vice-Treasurer), Sharon Kleyn (Vice-Secretary), Elizabeth Ensink (Librarian), and Rev. Spronk (Spiritual Advisor). We are thankful the Lord has provided wise and capable members to assist in the service of his kingdom. A special thank you to the retiring members: Matt DeBoer, Brad Ophoff, Lydia Koole, Lynette Bleyenberg and Rev. William Langerak.

The main responsibility of the Federation Board is to oversee and assist in the planning of the PR Young Peoples’ convention. The 2016 convention will be hosted by Grace PRC in Illinois at the Lake Williamson Christian Conference Center. We look forward to working with Grace in the planning of this wonderful, God-glorifying experience for our Young People.

The Federation Board is also privileged with the oversight of Beacon Lights. This publication has been a blessing to the Protestant Reformed denomination as a whole and especially for the young people. The Beacon Lights staff is a hard working group led by Editor Mark Hoeksema. Be sure to thank these staff members if you have the opportunity.

Young Calvinists is a group organized by the Federation Board with the intent of assisting in the spiritual growth of the Protestant Reformed youth. The current members of this group are Alex Thompson, Mary Mahtani, Kim Pryor, Seminarian Justin Smidstra, Brad Bruinsma, David Mahtani, and David Kuiper. This group is currently planning several fantastic events that we encourage the youth to attend. We also encourage you to read the blogs that Young Calvinists publishes online.

Finally, we ask that you pray for the Federation Board in this upcoming year’s work. We are thankful for the Lord’s blessings of wisdom and guidance and trust in his eternal will to preserve the church.

Stefan is president of the Federation Board is a member of Grandville Protestant Reformed Church in Grandville, Michigan.
# Federation Board
## Annual Financial Report
(2014-2015)

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*Notes:
Please note the following:

1. Several people who attended the 2014 Convention did not cash their subsidy checks till August (after the convention) and this year the check was written to SEPRC who then wrote out checks to individuals.

2. First of Holland took out their entire allotted $25,000 dollar loan the first year, most churches take 3 years to borrow this much.

3. The Beacon Lights had to be paid their percentage of the dues for the past year and the Young Calvinists were created and paid for.

4. A special gift was approved to finance conventioneers from Ireland to attend the 2015 Convention.
A Sonnet to the Savior
Romans 7:24

A vessel tossed among the towering waves;
A tender reed reviled by raging winds;
A blooming flower blighted by the frost;
A vapor vanquished as the sun ascends.

Oh, what am I, but weak and frail,
When sin’s dark Enemy assaults my mind,
And wickedness abounds on every side,
And even my own flesh desires my will to bind?

The good I will to do becomes a filthy rag
As soon as it has exited my tainted flesh;
The evil that I would not do, becomes instead my offering
Each day, with tears, and fears, and trembling afresh.

A wretched one I am! Who shall deliver me?
I cannot place my trust in one like me, with debt
To pay; I cannot dwell before the living God’s pure Purity
In these my garish garments, still by sin beset!

Thanks be to God that I can sing a song of victory
In Jesus Christ—true God, and truly man—Who died for me!
Devotional

Sarah Mowery

The Daily Press

“press toward the mark…” (Philippians 3:14)

December 8

Christ, the Wisdom of God
Read Proverbs 8:22–36
If you were given the task of arranging the passages of scripture in chronological order—not in the order in which they were inspired and written down, but with regard to their content—you could put Proverbs 8:22–31 near the very beginning of your list. Christ, the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24) was before God’s works of old. When Elohim created the heavens, the clouds, the sea, and the earth, Jesus Christ, the Word, was there. Indeed, “by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible…all things were created by him, and for him: and he is before all things, and by him all things consist” (Col. 1:16–17).

Proverbs 8 offers a beautiful glimpse into the covenant relationship that exists between God the Father and God the Son: “Then shall be fulfilled (v. 24). What do the ungodly fear? They fear their own things consist” (Prov. 8:30). What a wonder I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his ship that exists between God the Father and God the Son: “Then shall be fulfilled (v. 24). What do the ungodly fear? They fear their own things consist” (Col. 1:16–17).

Sing or pray Psalter #302.

December 9

A Grisly Feast
Read Proverbs 9:13–18
The first part of Proverbs 9 describes Wisdom’s banquet, at which she imports understanding to the simple. Her words “are life unto those that find them, and health to all their flesh” (Prov. 4:22). The verses that we read today describe another banquet. The foolish woman hosts this feast. Like Wisdom, she invites the simple to her table. The water she serves is sweet, and the bread tastes pleasant, but the food is deadly. Too late the guests who sit at her table realize that all who dine there will die. “He goeth after her straightway, as an ox goeth to the slaughter…as a bird hasteth to the snare, and knoweth not that it is for his life” (Prov. 7:22–23).

Brother, sister, what sins tempt you? Does sexual sin seem sweet, or gossip, pleasant? Maybe you relish worldly entertainment, or the pioneers were to preserve every precious thing they could. In contrast, we live in an incredibly wealthy—and wasteful—society. Proverbs 12:27 is recorded not only for those of us who enjoy hunting. It reminds all of us that “the substance of a diligent man is precious.”

Sing or pray Psalter #333.

December 10

Dread Realized and Desire Fulfilled
Read Proverbs 10:23–32
This passage is full of reminders regarding the futures of the wicked and the righteous. It teaches that the dread of unbelievers will be realized, while the desire of the righteous will be fulfilled (v. 24). What do the ungodly fear? They fear their own destruction, which comes swiftly. They will be swept away in the whirlwind of God’s wrath, but the righteous, who are built on the firm foundation of Jesus Christ, will stand secure forever (v. 25). “The fear of the LoRD prolongeth days: but the years of the wicked shall be shortened” (v. 27).

Knowing this, do you follow the way of Jehovah? His way is a stronghold for the just (v. 29). Heed his words in Psalm 37: “Rest in the Lord and be thou still, / With patience wait his holy will, / Enduring to the end. / Fret not though sinners’ gains increase; / Forsake thy wrath, from anger cease; / It will to evil tend.”

Sing or pray Psalter #96.

December 11

The Things God has in Store
Read Proverbs 11:16–31
My children love to sing a song that goes like this: “I’m just a child, my life is still before me / I just can’t wait to see what God has for me / But I know that I will trust him / And I’ll wait to see what life will bring for me.” Listening to them sing those words sometimes brings me to tears. They exuberantly look forward to the future. I, on the other hand, am apprehensive when I consider the years ahead, for I know that in the world they will have tribulation (John 16:33).

But this morning God’s word reassured me: “Though hand join in hand, the wicked shall not be unpunished: but the seed of the righteous shall be delivered” (Prov. 11:21). When I think about my children’s future from that perspective, I can’t wait to see what God has in store for them. For “eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” (1 Cor. 2:9).

Sing or pray Psalter #278.

December 12

Precious Substance
Read Proverbs 12:15–28
Our family enjoys Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Little House on the Prairie series. Whenever we read one of those books, I’m struck by how careful the pioneers were to preserve every precious thing they could. In contrast, we live in an incredibly wealthy—and wasteful—society. Proverbs 12:27 is recorded not only for those of us who enjoy hunting. It reminds all of us that “the substance of a diligent man is precious.”

“Our substance must not be precious to us because we make idols of material things. No, we “cannot serve God and mammon” (Matt. 6:24). Our substance should be precious to us exactly because it’s not “ours” at all: all that we have been given belongs to God. Therefore, we’re not wasteful like the prodigal son (Luke 15), nor do we follow the example of the servant who buried his talent in the ground (Matt. 25). The Christian is not a consumer, but a caretaker—not slothful, but stewardly. Not wasteful, but wise to use his substance in service of the God who gave it and mindful of Jesus’ words: “if therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true

Sing or pray Psalter #332.
A Good Man Leaves an Inheritance
Read Proverbs 13:12–25

Proverbs 13:22 reads, “A good man leaveth an inheritance to his children’s children.” Does this passage refer to a monetary inheritance or to something far richer? This text originates in the Old Testament, when the inheritance that a godly man left his children was his share of the land of Canaan, which typified one’s citizenship in heaven. Remember Naboth’s refusal to sell his inheritance to King Ahab? That response came in obedience to God’s command in Numbers 26:7: “For every one of the children of Israel shall keep himself to the inheritance of the tribe of his fathers.”

When it comes to monetary inheritances, Proverbs 20:21 cautions, “An inheritance may be gotten hastily at the beginning; but the end thereof shall not be blessed.” Author Randy Alcorn comments, “Wise parents can leave enough to their children and grandchildren to be helpful without leaving them so much as to hurt them. Your children should love the Lord, work hard, and experience the joy of trusting God. More important than leaving your children an inheritance is leaving them a spiritual heritage.”

Parents, is the inheritance that you’re laying up for your children everlastong one? Children, on what kind of an inheritance have you set your heart?

A Merry Heart
Read Proverbs 17:13–28

In everyone that he creates, God unites a body and a soul. Our bodies and souls are so closely connected that a light heart often accompanies a healthy body, but when the body is sick, the soul is also inclined to sorrow. The reverse is true too: “A merry heart doeth good like a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones” (Prov. 17:22). There is a mirth that ends in heaviness: “Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him show out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom…” (James 3:13–17). In that way “The lips of the wise disperse knowledge: but the heart of the foolish doeth not so” (Prov. 15:7).

A Good Man Leaves an Inheritance
Read Proverbs 13:12–25

When you have a big decision to make, do you rely on your own wisdom, or do you seek the advice of your fellow saints? Proverbs 15:22 declares, “Without counsel purposes are disappointed: but in the multitude of counselors they are established.” Proverbs 11:14 echoes, “Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counselors there is safety.” What must we do when we’ve received a multitude of counsel? We consider it carefully and prayerfully in the light of God’s word, and then we make our decision. We must beware that we don’t seek a multitude of counselors only because we want to find someone whose opinion agrees with ours. That’s what Solomon’s son Rehoboam did in 1 Kings 12, and the entire nation was destroyed as a result of his foolishness. A wise man asks advice because he truly desires understanding (Prov. 15:14).

This passage brings to my mind a benefit of attending Bible study. A Bible study is a gathering of believers who are seeking counsel regarding their strategy in the battle against sin, Satan, and their own sinful selves. Proverbs 20:18 applies to that fight, too: “Every purpose is established by counsel: and with good advice make war” (Prov. 20:18).

Two Teachers
Read Proverbs 16:16–33

Two teachers are mentioned in this passage. One teacher is the wise man’s heart: it teaches his mouth. Out of the abundant well of wisdom that is his heart, his mouth speaks (Luke 6:45). The second teacher is the wise man’s mouth. His sweet, persuasive speech increases the learning of those who are about him. “ Pleasant words are as an honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones” (v. 24).

You and I need to remember this when we’re interacting with others, including our children, family members, neighbors, and brothers and sisters in Christ. When you’re tempted to speak quickly and in anger, recall James 1:20: Man’s anger doesn’t produce righteousness—not in the one speaking, nor in the one spoken to. “Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him show out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom….” (James 3:13–17). In that way “The lips of the wise disperse knowledge: but the heart of the foolish doeth not so” (Prov. 15:7).

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Are you characterized by a joyful heart that brings spiritual health to others, or does your bitter, pessimistic disposition dry out their bones as well as your own?

Sing or pray Psalter #357.

Sing or pray Psalter #1.

Sing or pray Psalter #326.

Sing or pray Psalter #112.

December 15

In the Multitude of Counsellors
Read Proverbs 15:21–33

When you have a big decision to make, do you rely on your own wisdom, or do you seek the advice of your fellow saints? Proverbs 15:22 declares, “Without counsel purposes are disappointed: but in the multitude of counselors they are established.” Proverbs 11:14 echoes, “Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counselors there is safety.” What must we do when we’ve received a multitude of counsel? We consider it carefully and prayerfully in the light of God’s word, and then we make our decision. We must beware that we don’t seek a multitude of counselors only because we want to find someone whose opinion agrees with ours. That’s what Solomon’s son Rehoboam did in 1 Kings 12, and the entire nation was destroyed as a result of his foolishness. A wise man asks advice because he truly desires understanding (Prov. 15:14).

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Sing or pray Psalter #1.

Sing or pray Psalter #213:1–3.

Sing or pray Psalter #357.
A Good Thing
Read Proverbs 18:17–24
Too often the church takes her cues from the world. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the realm of marriage. Churches today are plagued with divorce. Some have compromised their once-Biblical stances forbidding sexual activity outside of marriage and homosexual activity. As the news media repeatedly reports that mainstream adults are waiting longer to marry, so it seems in the church as well.

Perhaps you’re a single person who desires to be married, but God hasn’t placed the right person on your path yet. You need to remember that though it may be painful, God’s way for you is perfect. Employ your free time and your talents not in the service of self, but of Jehovah and his people. Perhaps you’re single and you like it that way: you’d rather establish your career, become financially stable, and buy a few toys before you settle down. Then you had better seriously consider the word of God in Proverbs 18:22: “Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favour of the Lord.” (Notice, young man: you’re to take initiative! You’re the one to whom God has given the responsibility of searching!) Sing or pray Psalm #281.

No Respector of Persons
Read Proverbs 19:17–29
James 2 begins with this plea: “My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons.” The Bible exposes us as respecters of persons by nature. Proverbs 14:20: “The poor is hated even of his own neighbor: but the rich hath many friends.” Proverbs 19:7: “All the brethren of the poor do hate him: how much more do his friends go far from him?” He pursueth them with words, yet they are wanting to him.” What is your attitude toward the needy in your family or congregation? Some are poor in other ways: are you ready to extend kindness toward your unpopular classmates? “He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the Lord.” (Prov. 19:17). That man shows kindness to the poor because he’s grateful to Jehovah for saving him from spiritual bankruptcy.

There is a promise attached to the calling to lend to the poor: “That which he hath given will he [Jehovah] pay him again.” No, we don’t lend to the poor because we expect God to pay us back. “That which he hath given will he [Jehovah] pay him again.” (Prov. 19:17). No, we don’t lend to the poor because he’s grateful to Jehovah for saving him from spiritual bankruptcy.

Sing or pray Psalm #73.

The Rod of Correction
Read Proverbs 20:15–30
The general consensus in our society seems to be that corporal punishment—spanking—is cruel. Instead, parents are encouraged to barter, bribe, or simply bear their children’s misbehavior. But our heavenly Father commands Christian parents to administer the rod of correction when their children disobey. The connection between the behind and the heart may be hard for us to discern, but Proverbs 20:30 (NKJV) asserts that it’s there: “Blows that hurt cleanse away evil, as do stripes the inner depths of the heart.” Proverbs 22:15 agrees: “ Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it for from him.” How are believing parents to administer the rod? 1) In love; 2) with self-control; 3) consistently; 4) accompanied by reproof, that is, instruction from God’s word; 5) preceded by prayer (a silent, personal prayer) and 6) followed by prayer, an audible prayer with your child. Discipline is a difficult duty, isn’t it, fellow parents? Here’s a promise from our heavenly Father to motivate us to obey: “Correct thy son, and he shall give thee rest; yea, he shall give delight unto thy soul” (Prov. 29:17).

Sing or pray Psalm #106.

God’s Counsel Stands
Read Proverbs 21:13–31
How great is the God whom we serve? Listen: “I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure” (Isa. 46:9–10). “The Lord of hosts hath sworn, saying, Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it stand” (Isa. 14:24). Although “there are many devices in a man’s heart; nevertheless the counsel of the Lord, that shall stand,” for “there is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the Lord” (Prov. 19:21; 21:30). Our God is so great that he determined every detail of your life, and he directs your steps (Prov. 16:9). Take comfort: he rules over the wicked also. Even when unbelieving men committed the worst atrocity imaginable—the crucifixion of the holy, anointed Son of God—they gathered together, “for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done” (Acts 4:28). What a mighty God we serve!

Sing or pray Psalm #86.

Slave to the Lender
Read Proverbs 22:17–29
In our society, debt is viewed as a financial tool. The Bible doesn’t condemn borrowing money, but it does warn against it: “The rich ruleth over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender” (Prov. 22:7). “Be not thou one of them that striketh hands, or of them that are sureties for debts. If thou hast nothing to pay, why should he take away thy bed from under thee?” (Prov. 22:26–27). In Proverbs 6, Solomon urges his son to deliver himself from being surety for his friend “as a roe from the hand of the hunter, and as a bird from the hand of the fowler.” Immediately following that instruction are the admonitions to the sluggard to heed the diligent ant.

Psalm 37:21 reminds us that if we do borrow, we must be faithful to pay back what we owe: “The wicked borroweth, and payeth not again: but the righteous sheweth mercy, and giveth.” The righteous man is the one who desires to “Owe no man anything, but to love one another” (Rom. 13:8a).

Sing or pray Psalm #97.

Not a “Foodie”
Read Proverbs 23:1–8 and 15–35
“Foodie.” That’s a term I see and hear more often lately. According to Merriam Webster’s Dictionary, a foodie is “a person who enjoys and cares about food very much.” You won’t find the word foodie in the Bible, but you will find a term that more accurately describes the same type of person: gluton. A gluton is person who is “given to appetite” (v. 2). How serious is gluttony? “The gluton shall come to poverty” (v. 21). In Philippians 3:19, the inspired apostle Paul describes enemies of the cross of Christ this way: “Whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things.” A gluton worships his stomach.

Food and the experience of eating are wonderful gifts from
God, pleasures that he created to point us to far more wonderful spiritual realities, such as partaking of Jesus Christ by faith and enjoying the communion of saints. Our physical appetites are satisfied rather quickly—when we eat beyond what we’re hungry for, we’re guilty of gluttony. In contrast, our soul’s hunger for God can never be fully satiated.

Sing or pray Psalter #426:1, 3, 5, and 7.

December
24

Tend Your Fields
Read Proverbs 24:13–34

Our next-door neighbor’s yard looks like the field of the slothful man that’s described in Proverbs 24:30–32. Where it’s not overgrown with thistles and waist-high weeds, it’s heaped with piles of junk. In contrast, we’ve considered previously that “the substance of a diligent man is precious” (Prov. 12:27). The diligent man tends his field well. This passage can be applied to more than our farming or gardening, however. Recently our pastor preached a sermon on this text in a series entitled “Living Joyfully in Marriage.” If you are married, are you diligent to tend that relationship? Do you water your marriage with thoughtfulness and godly communication? Do you pull out the weeds of sin that would threaten to choke the communion you’re called to have with your spouse? Our other relationships require constant nurture as well, and so do our spiritual lives. One can’t expect to bear fruit in his or her Christian life unless his godly walk is fed with the word of God, watered with prayer, and weeded by living in fellowship with the other members of Christ’s body.

How well are you tending the gardens in your life?
Sing or pray Psalter #357.

December
25

Love is Courteous
Proverbs 25:17

It’s Christmas Day, on which we commemorate the birth of our Savior. It’s a day for many of us will be full of hosting or visiting. Here’s a sober reminder for those of us who will be guests today, or any other day of the year: “Withdraw thy foot from thy neighbor’s house; lest he be weary of thee, and so hate thee” (v. 17). By nature we’re so self-absorbed we need to be admonished not to take advantage of our neighbors’ generosity to us. Instead, we must be pitiful and courteous (1 Pet. 3:8), mindful not only of our own needs and interests, but also of those of others (Phil. 2:4). The Christian must be characterized by love, which “doth not behave itself unseemly, and seeth not after things that are high” (1 Cor. 13:5).

While we can exhaust the hospitality of our friends and family, we have a Friend and Father whose welcome we can never wear out. In fact, it’s his desire that we visit him multiple times every day! “Blessed is the man that heareth me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors” (Prov. 8:34).

Sing or pray Psalter #26.

December
26

Where No Wood Is
Read Proverbs 26:13–28

We heated our former home with a wood-burning stove. Our oldest children were still young, but they understood that wood was necessary for the fire to burn. It was then that we memorized Proverbs 26:20–21: “Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth. As coals are to burning coals, and wood to fire; so is a contentious man to kindle strife.” I taught them that “the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity…” (James 3:5–6). Since that time we’ve considered Proverbs 26:18–19 as well. This is what the Bible says about the person who deceives his neighbor and then says, “I was only joking!” He is like a madman who throws flaming darts and deadly arrows.

Do the words that proceed out of your mouth minister grace to thehearers, or are they kindling that feeds the fire of strife? Where no wood is, there the fire will go out.

Sing or pray Psalter #386:1 and 4.

December
27

As Iron Sharpeneth Iron
Read Proverbs 27:17–27

Prov. 27:17 reads, “Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.” Just as metal sharpens like metal, wicked men sharpen their companions to do evil (Prov. 5:4), while Christians sharpen fellow saints to godliness. Hebrews 4:12 describes the iron on which we are to sharpen one another: “For the word of God is quick (living), and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword.” Ephesians 6:17 enjoins us to take up that sword in the fight of faith, and Psalm 149:6 says that the Lord’s saints: “Let the high praises of God be in their mouth, and a two-edged sword in their hand.”

So Jonathan sharpened David: he went to David in the wood, “and strengthened his hand in God.” (1 Sam. 23:16). Malachi mentions that those who feared the Lord spoke often with one another (Mal. 3:16). They weren’t busying themselves in casual conversation. No, like the saints in the early New Testament, they devoted themselves to teaching, fellowship, communion, and prayer (Acts 2:42–47). Likewise, “let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together…but exhorting one another” (Heb. 10:24–25).

Sing or pray Psalter #369.

December
28

Stop Your Flattering
Read Proverbs 28:15–28

Prov. 28:23 reads, “He that rebuketh a man afterwards shall find more favour than he that flattereth with the tongue.” What is flattery? Flattery is the use of excessive—and often exaggerated—compliments by one person in an attempt to bring him or herself into the favor of the one they’re flattering. Sincere compliments are meant to encourage another, but flattery either inflates the other’s self-importance or is intent on making oneself look kind, generous, or perceptive. Proverbs 29:5 teaches that a flatterer will be trapped by his own sin: “A man that flattereth his neighbour spreadeth a net for his feet.”

Proverbs 28:23 offers an alternative to flattery: rebuke. We’re often hesitant to rebuke another when necessary. We hesitate to rebuke for the same reason that we flatter: we’re focused on what others will think of us. But “open rebuke is better than secret love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful” (Prov. 27:5–6). “Let the righteous smite me; it shall be an excellent oil, and the路演g will not break my head” (Ps. 141:5). Is that the attitude with which you give and receive rebuke?

Sing or pray Psalter #70.

December
29

Antithesis
Read Proverbs 29:15–27

Antithesis. That’s a doctrine that’s not very popular today, but it’s a very important doctrine. The antithesis is “the separation and opposition
between darkness and light, believer and unbeliever, church and world” (Doctrine According to Godliness). The antithesis plays an integral part in our salvation, as revealed already in the third chapter of the Bible: “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed…”

Ever since man’s fall into sin, “An unjust man is an abomination to the just: and he that is upright in the way is abomination to the wicked” (Prov. 29:27). So Cain, who was of that wicked one, “slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother’s righteous. Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you” (1 John 3:12–13). Are you able to say with David, “Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate thee? and am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee? I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them mine enemies” (Ps. 139:21–22). We must, for we’re called to “love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15).

Sing or pray Psalter #99.

Never Satisfied?
Read Proverbs 30:15–33

The horseleach described in Proverbs 30 has a voracious appetite: she is never filled. Similarly, the grave, the barren womb, and the land plagued by drought, and fire, are never satisfied. This list is meant to be instructive, not exhaustive, for Proverbs 27:20 adds to it: “Hell and destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied.” There’s a warning for us: our adversary, the devil, is a relentless and persistent enemy, and the appetite of our carnal minds for the pleasures of sin is never full.

We must combat our insatiable sinful natures with contentment. I read once that we need to have contentment in two areas: in the area of things we have and don’t want, and in the area of things we want but don’t have. How is your contentment in those two areas faring? Hebrews 13:5 is instructive when it comes to combating covetousness with contentment: “Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.”

What’s the reason we truly can be satisfied? We belong to Jehovah in Christ Jesus. Not only will he never forsake us: he is working all things for our good.

Sing or pray Psalter #32.

More Precious than Rubies
Read Proverbs 31

The book of Proverbs contains many warnings about the foolish woman, the strange woman, the contentious woman, and the woman who lacks discretion. It’s striking, then, that the book concludes by describing at length the virtuous woman. The virtuous woman is characterized by selflessness and godliness. Her industry is driven by wisdom and kindness. She cares for the members of her household and extends her hands to her needy neighbors as well. How highly does God value a virtuous woman? “Her price is far above rubies.” Sometimes we wives and mothers give in to the temptation to desire a more prominent career, one that seems as if it would be more interesting or fulfilling. But God thinks highly of those who are keepers at home. Indeed, a prudent wife is a gift from Jehovah (Prov. 19:14b). Husbands and children, have you been blessed with a wife and mother who fears the Lord? She needs to hear your encouragement and praise of her faithful labors, lest she become weary in well-doing.

Many of the virtues of the godly wife in Proverbs 31 can be extended to the church. Is your congregation a virtuous, industrious manifestation of Christ’s bride?

Sing or pray Psalter #360.
man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?” (Num. 23:19). “Search the scriptures”: they testify of our faithful heavenly Father and Jesus Christ, our merciful and faithful high priest (John 5:39 and Heb. 2:17). To know them is to know the faithful and eternal God, the giver of life (John 17:3).

Sing or pray Psalm #332.

January

4

Remember
Read Psalm 77

Asaph doubts God’s faithfulness in Psalm 77. He brings himself to trust in Jehovah once again by meditating on the Loër’s faithfulness to him in the past.

For more than seven decades, God has provided the Beacon Lights with dedicated writers, editors, printers, and readers of its edifying material: he has been faithful! But what does the future hold? How much longer will we be permitted to print material that’s biblical and antithetical? We need not worry when we consider the future, for “The Lord thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations” (Deut. 7:9). When we—and when our children—reach the end of this earthly life, we’ll be able to look at our fellow saints and say with Joshua, “And, behold, this day I am going the way of all the earth: and ye know in all your hearts and in all your souls, that not one thing hath failed of all the good things which the Lord your God spake concerning you; all are come to pass unto you, and not one thing hath failed thereof” (Josh. 23:14). So “let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised)” (Heb. 10:23).

Sing or pray Psalm #241.

January

5

Faithfulness: A Fruit of the Spirit
Read 1 Thessalonians 5

In Galatians 5:22 “faith” is listed as one of the fruits of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. There the word faith does not mean saving faith: it is better understood to mean “faithfulness.” Faithfulness is a spiritual virtue of the saint by which he is loyal toward the Father and Christ with the result that the saint is also loyal, reliable, and dependable toward others whom the Father providentially brings upon his pathway in life and whom he must serve in some way in his place and calling in life. When one is faithful to the Father and Jesus Christ as revealed in his word, he will be a faithful, trustworthy, and reliable Christian, member of his church, officebearer, spouse, friend, employer, employee, parent, school teacher, student, or child” (Smit, The Fruit of the Spirit of Jesus Christ).

Our Lord Jesus Christ was faithful to accomplish all the work that his Father gave him to do. Even today he works as our faithful intercessor on the right hand of God. When we are discouraged in our callings, we can rest in the knowledge that he will be faithful to sanctify us, to preserve us, and to bring to completion the good work that he has begun in us (Phil. 1:6).

Sing or pray Psalm #389.

January

6

If We are Faithless
Read 2 Timothy 2

Our God is faithful. Our Savior Jesus Christ is faithful. The Holy Spirit is faithful. The triune God does not have to work to be faithful: faithfulness is one of his attributes. He cannot be unfaithful. That’s a comfort to us who are called to be faithful but too often show a lack of fidelity, for if we are faithless, he remains faithful—“he cannot deny himself” (2 Tim. 2:13). Did you notice the other two uses of the word “faithful” in 2 Timothy 2? The church is called to commit the gospel to faithful ministers (v. 2), and this is a faithful saying: “For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him” (v. 11).

2 Thessalonians 3:3 declares, “But the Lord is faithful, who shall establish you, and keep you from evil.” Doesn’t that make you want to exclaim, “O Lord, thou art my God; I will exalt thee, I will praise thy name; for thou hast done wonderful things; thy counsels of old are faithfulness and truth” (Is. 25:1).

Sing or pray Psalm #243.

January

7

Well Done
Read Matthew 25:14–46

We can become discouraged in our calling to be faithful. For us, faithfulness requires diligence, and sometimes it can seem that, try as we may, our faithfulness bears no fruit. The scriptures record for us examples of faithful men for our encouragement. They include Abraham (Neh. 9:8), Moses (Heb. 3:2), Daniel (Dan. 6:4), Silas (1 Pet. 5:12), Tychicus (Eph. 6:21), Epaphras (Col. 1:7), and Onesimus (Col. 4:9). Some of those names may be unfamiliar to you: they belong to men about whom we know little. But God, who sees all things, rewards those who are faithful even in a very little (Luke 19:17). “Be thou faithful unto death,” declares our Lord, “and I will give thee a crown of life” (Rev. 2:10).

“Living out of God’s truth daily, praying on the basis of God’s promises and his mercies, new every morning, and laboring daily through faith in Christ alone is the way of our faithfulness” (Smit, The Fruit of the Spirit of Jesus Christ). When we live faithfully from day to day, we can look forward to hearing these blessed words: “Well done, thou good and faithful servant…enter thou into the joy of thy Lord” (Matt. 25:23).

Sing or pray Psalm #250.

Dear Daily Press readers:

There’s a change coming to this rubric in 2016: Mr. Ben Laning, a fellow member of Loveland PRC, will be sharing the task of writing these meditations with me. Ben is the 5th–6th grade teacher at Loveland Protestant Reformed Christian School. He and his wife Becky (Feenstra) have a darling baby daughter named Melanie. Ben’s parents are Rev. James and Margaret Laning—you may have read some of their excellent articles in The Standard Bearer before. I’m grateful for Ben’s willingness to share this high calling with me, especially as my husband and I look forward to the birth of our seventh child in May. Please pray for Ben and me: it’s our desire that the devotional that we write will praise our heavenly Father and profit you, our fellow saints.

Sarah Mowery
Petitionary Prayer for the Church

What Prayer Is

Prayer is a miracle. I cannot explain it. It is a miracle of grace. God gives us the grace to pray. He does not give it to anyone except to those whom he wants to be in his presence with him. And those whom he wants are those who belong to Christ, God’s own Son, for God wants Christ to be in his presence.

Prayer is a miracle because simply by talking to God we are carried on the wings of prayer into the place where God lives, high above all the universe and high above heaven itself.

We are really in God’s presence even though we cannot see him. Did you ever notice that when parents are teaching their children to pray, that these children know that they are praying to God, but they never ask where he is. It does not bother them that they talk with someone they cannot see.

God hears our prayers. He hears every one of them. Sometimes it seems to us as if he does not hear. Perhaps we are too wicked; perhaps God cannot be bothered with our silly needs when he has to run the whole universe and the things that happen in heaven. The psalmists all complain that God does not seem to hear them. They ask him if he is on a journey and is too far away to hear their prayers. They even tell God sometimes to wake up, for they have urgent matters to tell him. They even say of God that he puts his hands over his ears so that he cannot hear them.

But he always hears our prayers: Always!

When we are too much concerned with ourselves and do not think very much of anything else but what we want, God hears. Often though, he does not answer in a way we know he hears, just as parents who get weary of the whining of their children and ignore them.

But the miracle is that every prayer we make goes to God through Christ, our exalted Lord. Christ takes every prayer we make and carries it to God for us. It is good that he does this, for he makes our sometimes silly and sometimes even wicked prayers perfect. And he tells God how to answer us.

Prayer is a miracle because it is not time-bound. How shall I explain this? Let me tell you of my own experience. Sometimes I pray for God’s blessing on an event in the Philippines. By the time I pray, the event has already happened, measured by our clocks and different time zones. But God hears the prayer and answers it, for he is not bound by time. He does not say, “Sorry, you are too late.”

The Contents of Our Prayers

We must be careful when we pray. We would be careful if we went into the Oval Office to see the president. We would probably be more careful yet what we say (and ask for) if we were given an audience with the Queen of England in Buckingham Palace.

Our prayers must always be a response to what God says to us. We don’t speak first; God speaks first. But you wonder how? He speaks to us by his word. Our prayers are therefore, governed by his word. God tells us the things we may say to him; but he also tells us what we may not say to him. We had better be very careful what we say. If prayer is the breathing of the Christian, then he gets his breath from the Bible. God’s speech to us in his word creates our speech to him.

Although there are many things that concern our own life that we must ask for and do ask for, God is not pleased when we are so intent on getting from him what we want (especially the things we want in this world). Often we badger him again and again. He becomes impatient with our whining. Jesus warns us against repetitions. We must remember that God knows what we need even before we ask, and he will provide us with what we need.

Our prayers must always—let me say it again—must always be for the welfare of the church and our fellow saints. And if that means that we ask things for ourselves, it is only because we individually want to benefit the church in some way. Often we can be selfish. We can be so selfish that all that we care about is what happens to us. God intensely despises that.
sort of thing. And it is no wonder that when we pray selfishly, it seems as if he is too far away to hear us.

We have many needs, and we must seek them from God. But our reason for wanting them is so that we can serve the Lord better as members of his church. When someone is grievously ill and asks God for contentment, that person is eager to be obedient to God’s will. When a busy mother asks for wisdom and patience in the pressing duties of caring for children, she does so that she may bring up her children to be faithful to God’s covenant.

**The Importance of Prayer**

Some people can be very lax in prayer. It is not only that they do not have any desire to pray or are too busy with earning and spending money to pray, but some really do not think it necessary to pray, because, so they say, God will do what he has in eternity decided to do whether we pray or not. That is surely true. God does what he has planned to do. We want it that way too. We know that left on our own we would soon suffer shipwreck. But we are not released by this truth from praying. It is rather the case that it increases the need and desire for prayer. Does that sound contradictory? Well, it isn’t. God sets us straight. Read James 5:16–18. The last part of verse 16 is what I am interested in: “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.” The Greek here is even stronger: “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man has power.” The Lord says this about a righteous man. He is one who knows he is righteous in Christ and is thankful for such a superb gift as righteousness, in which he is made known to be innocent of all sin in God’s judgment.

Elijah’s prayers, first for terrible drought and then for rain, were for the good of apostate Israel under Ahab, not for himself! The prayer of Elijah brought about drought and then rain after 3 ½ years. Elijah’s prayer was effectual. Remember how God did not even answer his prayer until Elijah prayed seven times. Elijah’s prayer had tremendous power. When we pray for the church, our prayers have tremendous power with God! God does all he has decided in his counsel to do, and it is in fact brought about by the prayers of God’s people.

**What to Pray For**

The most important request we can make to God is that he keep his church faithful to the truth of scripture and our confessions. If our (your) church is unfaithful, there is not a lot of sense in praying for anything at all. Thus when we pray for the church we pray for faithful ministers who know, love, and preach the truth, for faithful elders and deacons who are watchmen on the walls of Zion (Ezek. 33), for all the saints to know the truth, love the truth, study the truth, and live the truth, and for a godly life among the children of the covenant, among the young people, and among everyone in the church. An ungodly life of one who professes to be a Christian does more harm to the church than we can measure with any spiritual yardstick.

When we pray for the church, we pray for our fellow saints in all their sorrows and afflictions. Remember that all God’s saints go to heaven, or—dreadful thought—none of us does. We pray for the mission work of the church, which today is in Pittsburgh and the Philippines. We pray for the seminary, for what can a church do without ministers? We pray for faithful covenant instruction of the children of the covenant. We pray for God’s church everywhere in the world, especially the churches we know, found in Northern Ireland, Singapore, Myanmar, the Philippines, and in Australia. It was Dr. Abraham Kuyper who, although he was speaking of prayers in church, said that no prayer ought to be prayed to God without a prayer for Christ’s universal church. I add that whenever and wherever you pray you have a responsibility to pray for Christ’s universal church.

When young men and women pray for the church, they pray that if God will be pleased to use them in the church in a special way, that they may consider it a privilege. “He who desires the office of a bishop [elder or minister] desires a good thing (1 Tim. 3:1). They pray for a godly mate: if a man, for a mother in Israel; if a woman, for a father who rules his home in Christ’s name. They pray that their lives may center in and rotate around the church so that they eagerly snatch at any way they can be of service. They pray that they may prepare themselves by faithful attendance in church, catechism and Bible study, and by regular personal devotions, to live godly lives.

There is so much to pray for that we need to separate a time in the day for our prayers, keeping in the front of our minds what we must pray for. A strong Christian is a praying Christian. A strong church is a praying church.

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Prof. Hanko is professor emeritus from the Protestant Reformed Seminary.
The Pilgrim’s Burden

The Christian’s burden is hardest to bear,
Whether white or black, he has to wear
The most troublesome, difficult burden of all,
Because our head, Adam, did fall.

Do you remember “Pilgrim’s Progress”, that book?
In which Christian, a journey he took?
His burden, so great it did weigh,
That in the Slough (of Despond) he nearly did stay,
And many a time did he turn away,
And from his path he oft did stray.

Many a time, because of our whim,
And the fact we rather choose sin,
We repeatedly leave our Lord, and him,
So kind and just, He still chose to save us,
Even though we, made from the dust,
Always follow our every lust.
We have to repent, and love him we must!
We must love God, but for the world we still care.
To leave him? Rely on ourselves? Do we dare?
We are weak, divided, two men at war,
And Christ still gave us the keys to his door?
Could we ever even ask of him more?

We as Christians must forever learn,
That it is God alone to whom we turn,
Because Christians have burdens, many we wear,
This is why our burdens are hardest to bear.

Kalysta DeKraker is a graduate at Covenant Christian High School and a member of Southwest Protestant Reformed Church in Grandville, Michigan.
Praying for God’s Will to Be Done

If it be Thy will.” How often don’t we use those words in our prayers? “If it be thy will.” It’s important for us to use those words. When Jesus instructed his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount, he taught them to pray “Thy will be done.” Later, toward the end of his ministry, Jesus himself prayed for his Father’s will to be done in the garden of Gethsemane just days before his crucifixion. Praying for God’s will to be done is a calling given to us by God himself, but it’s not necessarily an easy one. The truth is, because we still struggle with our old man, it is very much in our nature to want our own will to be done. Sometimes, we pray the words, “Let thy will be done” while our heart really says, “Let my will be done. Please, God, just do it my way.”

It is easy for me to pray, “God, keep me in safety and health if it be thy will.” It is not so easy for me to add, “But if it is thy will that I face sickness, then give me patience in that trial.” It is easy for me to thank God for the freedom we enjoy in this country and ask him to preserve it “if it be thy will.” It is not so easy for me to add, “But if that is not thy will, give me the strength to face fierce persecution.” It is easy for me to ask God to provide for my physical needs “if it be thy will.” It’s not so easy to add, “But if it is thy will that I live in poverty, give me contentment and keep me from envy.”

When I pray for God’s will, whatever that will may be, I find I have a much harder time praying sincerely than when I pray for God’s will as I would like it to be. Toward the beginning of this school year, I struggled to pray for God’s will when I found out that the father of one of my best friends needed major surgery to remove a tumor that was pressing against his brain. Not only am I close to my friend, but I’m close to the rest of her family as well. I can’t count the number of times I’ve eaten dinner at her house or hung out with her siblings even when she wasn’t around, and every single member of that family means an awfully lot to me. And her dad is just one of those people that you look up to. I’ve seen him lead his family in devotions, listened to stories from his childhood and heard him tell the corniest dad-jokes. As much as this man means to me, it’s nothing compared to what he means to his wife and kids.

When my friend first told me about the surgery, she asked me to pray for her dad and family. I told her that I would, but at the time, I didn’t realize just how difficult that would be for me. I prayed a lot in the months leading up to the surgery, and there were some things that it was easy to pray for. It was easy to pray that the surgery would go well and accomplish what it was supposed to do. It was easy to pray that there would be no complications. It was easy to pray that the recovery would be quick. But I will be honest with you, I could sometimes hardly pray the words “if it be thy will.” Because what if the things that I wanted so badly weren’t God’s will? What if it was God’s will for the surgery not to be successful or to have bad side effects, or even for my friend’s family to lose their husband and father. I didn’t even want to think about those possibilities, much less bring them before God in prayer. But that, I realized, was just what I was doing when I prayed, “If it be thy will.”

It can be very difficult for me to pray for God’s will to be done because sometimes I am afraid of what his will might be. I am scared that it might be God’s will for me to lose someone I’m close to. I’m scared that it might be God’s will to watch all my friends get married and have kids and never have that myself. I’m afraid that I might not like the plans God has for my life as much as the plans I would make for myself.

As humans, we have a very earthly idea of what is good for us. It is easy for us to imagine that if God loved us, he would make our lives on earth free from suffering, perfectly happy. After all, that is usually how we treat others when we are acting out of love. But in his love, God purposes something for his beloved that is greater than a life free of pain. He purposes eternal joy and salvation. His primary concern is for the spiritual welfare of his people, not their perfect happiness in this life.
The Christian life isn’t one of ease. We’re not just here to enjoy the ride. Instead, the Christian life is one of transformation. We who were the slaves of death and sin have been set free, and the Spirit of our Lord Jesus is working in us to sanctify us and make us the holy and beautiful bride of Christ. That transformation can be painful. In fact, Peter compares us to gold being placed under intense heat and melted down so all the contaminants are burned away. Often it is through pain and suffering that we are most transformed and drawn close to God. Throughout the Bible, we see that God uses suffering in the service of his higher goal, that is, our eternal good.

In order for us to pray sincerely for God’s will to be done, we need to believe that God’s will is perfect, and that his way is better than our way, even when that means suffering for us. God’s word is full of examples that prove that to be true. Almost every Bible character we read about faced earthly difficulties—mockery, persecution, betrayal, loneliness, sorrow, loss, fear, hatred, danger, uncertainty, false accusations, rejection. Yet God orchestrated those trials in the lives of his people for their ultimate good. In order to help us see this, I’d like to look at several examples from scripture in which good came out of suffering.

First, read Luke 15:11–18, which records part of the parable of the prodigal son:

And he said, A certain man had two sons: And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father’s have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee.

In this passage, notice that repentance came out of suffering. In this parable God used the hardships of a young man’s life to turn him from his sin and lead him to repentance. His heart was hard while he was in his father’s house. His heart was hard while he was living in the far country. Even when the famine came to the land he didn’t repent, but finally, when he was starving and employed in the most menial job, he realized his own desperation and his sin against his father and humbled himself to ask forgiveness. Sometime God uses a very low point in our lives to open our eyes to the desperateness of our own sinfulness and causes us to flee to the cross.

Next read 2 Corinthians 12:7–9. In this passage, notice that protection came out of suffering. Paul says,

And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.

God placed a particular trial into the life of the apostle Paul, not to turn him from sin, but to keep him from becoming exalted above measure. When Paul asked God to remove the trial from him, God did not grant Paul’s request because that trial was serving his purpose as a safeguard in Paul’s ministry. God’s response to Paul revealed a further purpose for the thorn. He taught Paul to lean on his grace through this trial and revealed his own strength through Paul’s weakness. Paul acknowledged this in his confession of verses 9–10:

Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

What a beautiful confession! As Paul was required to rely on God’s grace, he saw the power of Christ revealed and experienced God’s faithfulness to him.

Next, look at 2 Corinthians 1: 3–6 and notice that preparation comes out of suffering. Paul writes here to the church at Corinth:

Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort
wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ. And whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: or whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation.

God may use suffering in our lives not only to strengthen our faith, but also to prepare us to minister to others.

Next, think back on an Old Testament story in which the preservation of God’s church came out of suffering. Remember Joseph? He was sold as a slave into Egypt by his brothers. When he had proved that he was a faithful worker, he was unjustly accused and thrown into prison. Even after he had interpreted the visions of Pharaoh’s butler and baker, he was forgotten. He must have felt sometimes as if God had abandoned him and as if there was no purpose in his suffering. But God did have a purpose. He brought Joseph to the exact place that he needed to be in order to save God’s people from the famine. God exalted him to a position of power and authority, but he did it in his time, not man’s time, and in his way, not man’s way.

Look at Psalm 84:5–10 to see that God uses our suffering to cultivate in us a longing for heaven.

Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee; in whose heart are the ways of them. Who passing through the valley of Baca make it a well; the rain also filleth the pools. They go from strength to strength, every one of them in Zion appeareth before God. O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer: give ear, O God of Jacob. Selah. Behold, O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer: give ear, O God of Jacob. Selah. Behold, O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer: give ear, O God of Jacob. Selah. Behold, O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer: give ear, O God of Jacob. Selah. Behold, O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer: give ear, O God of Jacob. Selah.

In this passage, the valley of Baca can be translated as a valley of weeping or a valley of tears. As the psalmist thinks on the sorrows of this life, it causes him to turn his eyes heavenward and find his lasting hope in God. In verse ten he concludes that he prefers the things of God’s house to the long life, status, or pleasures offered to him by the tents of wickedness.

C.S. Lewis addresses this idea in his book The Problem of Pain. He recognizes that while we are in this world, we cannot be free from suffering, but God uses that suffering to direct our hearts to him. Lewis writes, “The security we crave would teach us to rest our hearts in this world.” He points out that life is filled with good things, such as the beauty of nature or the happiness of friendships, but he declares, “Our Father refreshed us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home.”

One final purpose that I don’t want to miss is that the glory of God’s own name may come out of our suffering. Think of Jesus’ healing of the blind man from John 9. We are told, “ Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.” That man had lived his whole life in blindness so that God’s power could be shown in him.

Remember the story of Lazarus in John 11. Mary and Martha sent for Jesus when their brother became sick and desired that Jesus would heal him. But it was God’s will that they had to go through the pain of losing their brother to death so the onlookers at the grave would see that Jesus received his power from God and that God’s name would be glorified.

At this point, we’ve looked at many examples in which God used difficult circumstances in the lives of his children to bring about a good end. But it needs to be said that we may not always be able to see that good end when God leads us in a difficult way. Maybe we will be able to look back on a trial years later and see good that we couldn’t see at the time. Maybe in this lifetime we will never really understand how God used certain circumstances for good. What we can be absolutely sure of, though, is that our God is faithful, that he is completely good and wise, and that his ways are perfect. That’s what faith is. It is our knowledge and conviction of the truth that God has revealed to us—not dependent on our own sight.

If we still need convincing that God’s way is best, let’s look at one final example from scripture. Listen to Jesus prayer to his Father in the garden of Gethsemane just hours before he was arrested by the leaders of the Jews. Matthew 26:38–39,

Then saith he [Jesus] unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me. And he went a little farther, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless as I will, but as thou wilt.
Jesus prayed a heart-wrenching prayer of agony to his Father, yet God’s answer was that he must go the way of the cross. God was willing to pour out his wrath for our sins on his own son so that we might have salvation and eternal life in him.

By studying the scriptures, we become convinced that God’s will is best, even when his will requires us to walk a difficult path. God reveals himself to us as the one who is sovereign over all things, the one who loves us more deeply than anyone else is able, and the only one who is really wise enough to choose the way that is best for us. When we know our God this way, then we are able to trust him, to submit to him, and to pray that his perfect will be done. And when we pray with a sincere heart for God’s will to be done, we experience peace.

When we pray sincerely for God’s will to be done, we won’t wonder whether the suffering we experience in this life is really for our best. We will know that God fully understands every second of our pain because he put it there. It is given to us by his loving, fatherly hand. We know the assurance that our pain is not senseless or wasted, but that it is in fact God’s best for us.

When we pray sincerely for God’s will to be done, we also experience the reality of God’s faithfulness to his promises. Listen to just two of them. Isaiah 41:10:

Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.

1 Corinthians 10:13:

There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.

When we pray sincerely for God’s will to be done, we find that by his Spirit he makes us desire his will more and more. As we learn the beauty of our God, he teaches us to desire what he desires and seek after what is truly pleasing to him. The pain of this life becomes easier to bear when we desire the holiness that God uses to work it in our lives. So let us pray to God for faith. Let us learn to trust his will rather than fear it. Let us pray from a sincere heart, “Thy will be done.”

Paula is a member of Southwest Protestant Reformed Church in Grandville, Michigan. This article is the text of a chapel speech given in April 2015 at Covenant Christian High School in Walker, Michigan.

Count It All Joy

W hat are the things you count as joy in this life? You take a moment to absorb the question, and then the list of all the good gifts God has given you begins to roll through your head. His grace, his salvation, his word, my family, my friends, my work, my dreams, my successes, my memories, my laughter. These are the things we count as joy. “My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing” (James 1: 2–4).

James is challenging us to add some things to our list of joys. Don’t forget to add temptations (or trials) to that list you’ve got rolling through your head. Make sure you’re counting that sickness and that never-ending pain in your back. Be sure to remember that bout of cancer, that surgery, and the death of your loved one. These too, are the things we are called to count as joy. How can that be? How can trials and joy be placed in the same category, when these words are complete opposites of each other?

God does not place trials in our lives without reason. Through these trials, he works in our hearts in unfathomably beautiful ways that we cannot even see, and will probably never understand until we
cross over to glory’s side. These trials are means God uses to try our faith and to strengthen it in ways we could never accomplish alone. This is another way for him to deliver his love and his goodness to us. It has just been delivered in different packaging. His love and our own good are wrapped up inside that sickness, inside that surgery, inside that loss. Sitting down and slowly peeling away the layers of that trial helps us to reach an understanding of his love for us, and it brings to us patience, and faith, and peace. We are to respond to these trials with joy, not because of the pain of the trials, but because of what God is sovereignly working through them.

My father was able to receive God’s love and goodness packaged in a foot surgery that had him laid up for weeks. As I watched him sit down and begin to unwrap this trial to find the patience and peace underneath, I prayed that he would be able to count the process joy. The place in which we meet our trials is the place where peace comes from turmoil. It is the place where faith defeats fear. It is the place where, by the grace of God, Romans 8:28 is true. It is a place filled with the all-consuming assurance that not only does God govern all things, but he does so with our very best interests in mind. And it is the place where joy is born of suffering.

Kelsey is a member of Calvary Protestant Reformed Church in Hull, Iowa.
Christ Our Captain

Danny bounced onto the couch next to his mom. "I want to hear more about Roman soldiers."

His sister Becky curled up on the couch on their mom’s other side. Their mom spread a blanket over all of them. "Let’s see. Last time we talked about the Roman soldier. This time we’re going to talk about the Roman army and its leaders. A Roman army was called a legion, and each legion was made up of 60 centuries, which were led by a centurion."

"There are a lot of centurions in the Bible." Danny rubbed his nose. He remembered talking about them in catechism. "Didn’t they command a hundred men or something like that?"

His mother smiled. "Yes, they did at first. But at the time Paul wrote to the Ephesians, the Roman emperor had changed the structure of the army so a centurion actually only commanded 80 men. But he was still called a centurion."

"That’s confusing," Becky scowled.

"An army is only as good as its captain or leader. A captain is the one who makes all the decisions and leads his army into battle. If the captain makes a mistake, the whole army fails. Sometimes, a bad decision by centurions or legates got the whole legion into trouble."

"That wouldn’t be good," Danny said. Getting into trouble was never a good thing.

"As Christians, we can be thankful that our captain is Christ. He never fails or makes mistakes. He was born and lived on this earth so that he could become our captain." Their mom flipped opened her Bible. "Paul writes to the Christians in Rome that we are more than conquerors in Christ. That’s a lot to say to a people who at that time had conquered most of the known world. But we have something that the Roman armies didn’t have."

"What’s that?" Danny couldn’t think of anything. The Roman armies had cool swords and armor and stuff.

"The Roman armies won a lot of battles, but they also lost a lot of battles too. When they marched into battle, they never knew if they’d win. And eventually their empire crumbled." Their mom wrapped an arm around each of them. "But in Christ, we already have the victory over sin and Satan. Christ won the battle when he died on the cross and rose again. And his empire will never crumble."

Questions to think about:

1. Read Hebrews 2:10, 12:1–4 and Romans 8:37 by yourself or with your parents. How is Christ our captain? What comfort does this bring?
2. How is Christmas connected to Christ being our captain?
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