

A Step of Faith

Ahaz said, “I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test” (Isaiah 7:12).

Scripture: Isaiah 7:10-15

Song: “Spirit, Lead Me”

At 1,535 feet, the Oriental Pearl Tower in Shanghai is one of China’s tallest structures. More daring tourists can view the city from its glass-floored observation deck 850 feet above the ground. When I visited, I watched as tourists stood, sat, or even lay on the glass floor. I, meanwhile, kept my back pressed tightly against the wall! My feet were planted safely on solid metal flooring, but I missed out on the amazing views below.

When the Lord told King Ahaz to choose a sign as proof that God would fulfill His word, Ahaz refused, quoting God’s own words back to Him. Ahaz was hardly Israel’s most righteous king, yet in this moment he chose legalistic piety over obedience. The Lord still fulfilled His word, but Ahaz missed the opportunity to step out in faith and be involved with the Lord’s work.

Obedying God’s Word can be uncomfortable when it means we must step into uncertain times and directions. Yet when we faithfully obey His call, we gain the opportunity to join His great work, and our trust will grow as we see His Word fulfilled—an amazing view!

Father, give me the courage to obey Your Word to me. Help me to trust You more deeply. In Jesus’ name, amen.

December 7–13. **Ruth Anne Burrell** lives in the Kansas City area, where she enjoys finding new coffee shops, trying out new recipes, and dreaming up new stories to tell.

Justice Through Relationship

“I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand” (Isaiah 42:6).

Scripture: Isaiah 42:1-9

Song: “Speak, O Lord”

George Müller cared for more than 10,000 British orphans during his lifetime. In fact, he was so successful at helping older orphans secure apprenticeships and professional training that the owners of several factories and mines complained about their inability to find enough unskilled laborers. Müller was thoroughly dedicated to the cause of justice for the orphan—and also deeply committed to his faith. He constantly prayed for provision, and the method he used to seek God’s will has since been adopted by thousands of Christians.

The Lord’s chosen servant was called to mete out justice to the nations, to open blind eyes and free captives. But he wouldn’t accomplish these things alone. The servant would be empowered with the Lord’s Spirit, and the Lord said He would take hold of His servant’s hand to “keep” him. True justice can only be delivered through relationship with the true judge.

When we are passionate about a cause, it can be easy to leap in without consulting God or seeking His will. Yet true justice can only be achieved through close, intimate knowledge of the Father’s heart. If we are to fulfill His call to justice, we must first answer the call to relationship with Him.

Father, please increase my desire for relationship with You. Teach me to walk closely with You so that I may know Your heart and act as Your instrument for justice. In Jesus’ name, amen.

The Labor of God's Call

“I [Isaiah] have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing at all. Yet . . . my reward is with my God” (Isaiah 49:4).

Scripture: Isaiah 49:1-7

Song: “Dear Refuge of My Weary Soul”

After college, I spent a year working for an inner-city after-school program. Many of the kids were cynical beyond their years, having experienced more trauma by age 10 or 11 than I had in my whole life. My role involved helping them with homework they didn't want to do and enforcing classroom rules they definitely didn't want to follow. I ended many days feeling completely useless, wondering if my work made any difference at all.

In Isaiah 49, the Lord's servant suffered discouragement from the seeming lack of forward progress in his mission to redeem Israel. Despite outward difficulties, however, he reaffirmed his trust in God. And in the following verses, God revealed His plan not only to redeem Israel but all the Gentiles as well.

Obeing God's call often leaves us feeling exhausted and discouraged, unable to do anything but lift our weary hands to Him in a plea for help. In these moments, it's important to remember that He is trustworthy and His plan is good. We may never see the fruit from our efforts in this life, but He is working behind the scenes to accomplish greater things than we can even imagine.

Father, this life is hard, and I am so often discouraged. Yet I trust that You have a better plan than what I am able to see. Please increase my faith. In Jesus' name, amen.

God's Unfailing Word

[The angel answered,] “No word from God will ever fail.”
“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled” (Luke 1:37-38).

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

Song: “Your Word”

William Shakespeare was a master of language. Experts have estimated that he coined more than 400 words during his life, many of which we still use every day. As language has morphed, however, Shakespeare’s plays have grown increasingly difficult for people today to read and understand. Talented actors use facial expressions and tones of voice to better communicate his meaning; but great as Shakespeare’s genius was, much of his archaic language is lost on modern audiences.

When Mary was told she would give birth to the Son of God, she was understandably puzzled, as she was an unmarried virgin. She asked how this would happen, and the angel answered her by telling her about the power of the Holy Spirit and pointing toward her cousin Elizabeth’s miraculous pregnancy in her advanced age. But in the end, the greatest encouragement toward faith that the angel offered was this: God’s Word never fails. What He says will happen, will happen.

The words we use today are fallible. Their ability to communicate is limited, and their meanings will fade. But God’s Word is unshakable, never-failing. His Word can be trusted, even when what He says seems impossible. Only with faith in that truth can we offer humble submission to His call as Mary did.

Father, thank You for Your unshakable Word in Scripture and that I can know with full confidence that You are able to fulfill all that You say. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Waiting and Worshipping

[Anna] never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying (Luke 2:37).

Scripture: Luke 2:34-38

Song: “While I Wait”

Several years ago, my dad was seeking God’s will on a decision. Though he wanted to take action, he felt God was telling him to wait. Confused, he asked for confirmation. The next day, my 7-year-old brother was flipping through my dad’s devotional book. “Huh,” he said suddenly. “This says, ‘Wait on the Lord.’ That’s weird.” My dad heard him and realized he had received exactly the confirmation he needed. And though waiting didn’t necessarily seem to make sense, it was what he needed to do.

Simeon and Anna spent their entire lives serving the Lord. For years Simeon had waited for the fulfillment of the Spirit’s promise that he would see the Messiah before he died. Anna, meanwhile, spent her widowhood expressing her love for the Lord daily through worship, prayer, and fasting. Their faithful obedience, demonstrated through waiting and worshipping, gave them unique receptivity to God’s Word regarding His Son’s future.

Waiting isn’t the glamorous thing to do. Most of the time we’d rather take action and do something for God. But over and over, Scripture shows God speaking to those who quietly worship and wait on Him. Rather than busily pursuing whatever to-do list we have filled our calendars with, let’s intentionally set time aside to wait on the Lord and worship Him, asking for His direction and waiting quietly for answers.

Father, teach me to slow my busy schedule and wait before You. Increase my desire to spend time with You. I want to hear Your voice. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Redemption Through Sacrifice

The women said to Naomi: . . . “Your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth” (Ruth 4:14-15).

Scripture: Ruth 4:9-17

Song: “Lead You to the Cross”

In Victor Hugo’s classic *Les Miserables*, recently released convict Jean Valjean rewards a bishop’s kindness by stealing his silver. When police capture Valjean, the bishop insists he gave Valjean the silver and gently chastises him for “forgetting” to take the valuable silver candlesticks as well. The bishop’s grace so thoroughly transforms Valjean that he spends the rest of his life performing similar acts of self-sacrifice.

After losing her husband and two sons, Naomi was so bereft of hope that she insisted her old neighbors call her Mara (which means “bitter”; Ruth 1:20) because of how bitter her life had become. In her suffering, she doubted God’s goodness entirely. By the end of the book, however, Ruth’s and Boaz’s courageous sacrifices returned hope to Naomi’s life. Through them, the Lord worked a mighty act of grace and redemption as He continued the line that led to King David—and to the Messiah.

Offering grace requires a huge amount of humility and self-sacrifice. It’s also one of the ways God most frequently draws people to Him. Sacrifice with no hope of reward is rare these days, and there is something utterly beautiful and alluring about it. If God can use our sacrifices to bring redemption in someone else’s life, can we possibly refuse?

Father, I want You to use me to draw people to You. Help me demonstrate Your grace. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Courageous Obedience

“Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:20).

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25

Song: “Trust and Obey”

A single day after hatching, North American wood ducklings must perform a death-defying leap from their nest in a tree to the ground 50 feet below. Their mother quacks a call from the ground, and although they don't know what will happen if they obey, they jump. Their tiny bodies flutter wildly in the air for several terrifying seconds until they hit a pile of leaves below, bounce once, and land on their feet.

Joseph was a just man. He had probably worked hard all his life to obey God's laws. Going through with wedding Mary would mean, at best, scorn and judgment from family and friends he had known all his life. He didn't know what raising a child conceived by the Holy Spirit would involve. Yet God told him not to be afraid, and Joseph chose to obey.

We often balk at obedience for reasons far less frightening than a 50-foot leap or parenting the Son of God. Despite God's past faithfulness, we become almost paralyzed by fear. Even then, God whispers gently, “Don't be afraid.” In the face of danger, possible rejection from those around us, and uncertain futures, God calls us to have courage, trust Him, and leap.

Father, thank You for the examples You have provided of courageous obedience. I am afraid, but I want to trust You. Please teach me to obey despite my fear. In Jesus' name, amen.