

## Acting in Love

**Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God** (Acts 7:55).

**Scripture:** Acts 7:54-60

**Song:** “By Our Love”

A neighbor lost their house and everything inside in a fire two days before Christmas. They were a proud family, but under such devastating circumstances, I offered help. I was greeted with anger. It was insinuated that I was overstepping my bounds and violating their privacy. My desires were genuine, but my actions weren't perceived in the same light. I backed away, knowing my only recourse was to continue to pray for them.

Stephen had been distributing food to widows and orphans as well as preaching publicly the message of salvation. Theologians say this first martyr was a testament to his beliefs. Even when confronted by opposition, he remained faithful. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he prayed for his accusers and pleaded for God to show them mercy.

Today, turn to the Holy Spirit for guidance and direction. If your attempts to spread God's love fall short of your expectations, don't become discouraged or lose your compassion for others. Remain faithful to the calling of God on your heart. May you stand strong in your commitment to serving God through your words and actions.

**Father,** guide our actions to be a testament of Your love for others, no matter the cost. In Jesus' name, amen.

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December 27–January 2. **Sarah Sanford** lives in Connecticut. She is a third-grade teacher and enjoys spending time with friends and family. She is an active member of her local church.

## The Gift

**When King Herod heard [that the king of the Jews was born] he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him (Matthew 2:3).**

**Scripture:** Matthew 2:1-8, 16-18

**Song:** “O Come, All Ye Faithful”

I held back tears as I watched my friend’s reaction to what I had thought was the perfect gift. Several months earlier, I’d found the gift and immediately purchased it. As Christmas Day came closer, I imagined her excitement with the gift. Several times I almost gave the secret away. But on Christmas morning, I was met with a completely different response than what I had expected. My special gift was not special in my friend’s eyes.

In our passage today, Matthew describes the reaction of King Herod and the people of Jerusalem to the birth of Jesus. We would think that God’s gift of His Son to the world would cause excitement and joy, not disturb people. After all, the long-awaited Savior had come, the promised Messiah was born! Many, such as the wise men, sought Him, but others were startled and fearful at the news.

Jesus’ presence evokes much of the same mixed emotions today. As we continue to celebrate His birth, reflect on your reaction to God’s gift. Jesus’ birth was an incredible demonstration of God’s love for us. Take time to welcome Him into your life and accept with faith the Father’s gift of His Son.

**Father,** thank You for the gift of Your Son. May we lovingly receive Him into our hearts. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Who Do You Live For?

**The kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free, hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains** (Revelation 6:15).

**Scripture:** Revelation 6:9-17

**Song:** “I Have Decided”

The storm moved in without warning. Big, puffy white clouds suddenly turned to gray, then black. The next thing we knew, lightning flashed in the distance and thunder was bouncing off the nearby mountains as a torrential rain started. I love a good storm, but not in the middle of a golf course! Everyone began to run for cover, searching for any protection that could withstand the ravages of the storm.

During that storm, it didn't matter if you were a CEO golfing with a potential customer or a teenage caddy working to help support your family. We all had to find shelter. Today's passage describes what some say is the Day of the Lord, or the last days. As the earth quakes and mountains crumble, there will be no place to hide. God will not be impressed by our position in life. The only important thing will be whether we trust Jesus and live for Him.

No one knows when Christ will return, but every day we have an opportunity to turn to Christ, renew our faith, and humbly live for Him. Whatever your situation in life, He is waiting to welcome you into His arms and protect you from the storm to come. Don't wait! Make the decision to follow Him today.

**Father,** I want to live for You. Help me to clearly see the path You have set before me. In Jesus' name, amen.

## Hear Our Cry

**Does he who fashioned the ear not hear? Does he who formed the eye not see?** (Psalm 94:9).

**Scripture:** Psalm 94:1-10

**Song:** “Hear Us from Heaven”

Life is unpredictable. A time of contentment suddenly changes and your world comes crashing down. The COVID-19 pandemic certainly illustrated this unpredictability. As a teacher, I left school on Thursday, March 12, with my room set for Friday and plans carefully laid out for the next week. We never returned to the room that school year. Distance learning took over, and the ripple effects were felt not only in my school but also across the country. The cry from many became, “How long will we have our lives put on hold?”

When we don’t understand our situation or receive immediate answers, we cry out. Often the cries are pleas to God to make things right. Others cry against Him, shaking their fists because they think He doesn’t care. The author of Psalm 94 illustrates a true side of God. The one who created our eyes and ears does hear and see what His people are going through. We will see Him handle the injustices, the unpredictable events, and even our frustration when we simply trust in Him.

Today place your confidence in the truth that God is in control. No matter how desperate our situation is, He is present. He never turns a deaf ear or a blind eye to His children. Go to Him, pour out your fears and desires, and rest in His perfect love.

**Father,** help me trust in You today with a thankful heart as I remember all that You have done for me—even when I often didn’t see or understand. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Support from Above

**When I said, “My foot is slipping,” your unfailing love, LORD, supported me** (Psalm 94:18).

**Scripture:** Psalm 94:11-23

**Song:** “Blessed Assurance”

Excitement filled the air. It was a perfect day for a birthday celebration on my friend’s sailboat. Since it was moored offshore, we had to row out in a smaller boat and then climb aboard. As I navigated this move, arms filled with presents and clothes, the rowboat began to drift away. With one foot in each boat, I screamed for help. I was seconds away from a humiliating descent into the water. But in a flash, several hands grabbed me and hauled me up to safety.

Life often mirrors what happened to me that day. We find ourselves trying to step from an unsteady perch to the comfort of a larger, more stable place. Our arms may be full of the baggage needed to get us through the day. However, as our reading today illustrates, when we start to slip, unable to make the move alone, God comes to the rescue. He is there to hold us up, away from the “deep waters” that surround us.

As you reflect on this past year, thank God for all the times He has provided deliverance from life’s troubles. He is our mighty fortress and shield. Rest in the assurance that when you turn your pleas to Him, He will reach down and offer you the safety and comfort you are longing for.

**Father,** thank You for Your unfailing love, which supports and protects us through all of life’s obstacles. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Children of God

**No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God (1 John 3:9).**

**Scripture:** 1 John 3:4-13

**Song:** "God's Family"

What is your ancestry? Years ago we had to rely on family stories to know where we came from, but with the availability of DNA kits we can now receive a wealth of information about our heritage. We can trace where we are from, learn our ethnicity, and even locate distant relatives. This information helps us understand our identity and the struggles our family has overcome, and it gives us a clearer picture of who we are.

This tracking of our physical heredity is exciting and informative, but we have another lineage, which John mentions in today's verse: our spiritual heritage. When we place our faith in Jesus, we become children of the God of the universe. It's equivalent to gaining holy DNA! It's important to recognize our spiritual identity. No matter how we may (or may not) be treated in light of that, we believers have the responsibility to live as new creatures who are members and ambassadors of a royal family.

May today be a new beginning for you. God has an exciting plan for your life. He is ready to further shape each of us for His work when we allow Him. Receive that transformation and humbly thank Him for all His blessings.

**Father,** help me to live each day remembering that I am a new creature who represents the family of God. In Jesus' name, amen.

## Two Hearts

**The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor** (Genesis 4:4-5).

**Scripture:** Genesis 4:1-13

**Song:** “Listen to Our Hearts”

“Listen to your heart.” That sign was posted in my cardiologist’s office. Its intent was to make patients aware of the signs and symptoms of heart disease. However, it made me pause and reflect on the condition of my heart spiritually. If I was honest, the way I’d handled some recent circumstances could have turned out differently if my heart had been God-centered instead of self-centered. I had taken control and worked things out on my own. Despite my actions, I realized God had come along beside me and gently nudged until I turned my heart away from myself and opened up to His grace.

The story of Cain and Abel is a familiar one, in which we also see two hearts. One heart is filled with love for God. Abel demonstrates this by bringing forth the best he had to offer God. On the other hand, God rejected Cain’s sacrifice. Genesis 4:6-7 shows God warning Cain that his heart was in jeopardy—and that it’s important to stand up and protect the heart.

The heart is the gateway to our actions. Just as God looks at its condition, we should be mindful of what has control over our hearts. Pay attention today as God helps steer you toward Him. Cultivate a heart for God and be open to receive all He has in store for you.

**Father**, help me keep my heart turned toward You. Let me be filled with Your humility and love for all You have done. In Jesus’ name, amen.