

Gift Giving

“Three times a year you are to celebrate a festival to me. . . . No one is to appear before me empty-handed” (Exodus 23:14-15).

Scripture: Exodus 23:13-19

Song: “Grateful”

When invited to honor a person at a special event, it is customary to bring a gift for the person celebrating a birthday, for the couple getting married, and so on. We don't show up empty-handed, because of our love and care for people. And we are not to show up empty-handed before God either.

God commanded the Israelites to celebrate three annual festivals in His honor. Once for His miraculous deliverance from Egypt, and twice to thank Him for providing their daily needs through the harvest—at the beginning of the season with firstfruits, and at the end of the season during the Ingathering (Exodus 23:16). While showing gratitude to God for His provision was something the Israelites could do daily, these special observances underscored their giving back to God because of the love and bounty He bestowed on them.

We should never come into God's presence empty-handed. Rather, our hearts should be filled with gratitude, celebrating the one who provides in both natural and supernatural ways.

Father, we celebrate all You have done and continue to do for us. Accept our gifts of time, talent, and treasure in gratitude for Your mercy and grace. In Jesus' name, amen.

January 10–16. **Toni Campbell** is passionate about showing the love of Christ through acts of service. She is the Benevolence Ministry leader at her church.

God's Protection

“I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared” (Exodus 23:20).

Scripture: Exodus 23:20-33

Song: “Angels Watching over Me”

My friend Debbie was living on her own and several states away from her mom, who was praying for her to return to the Lord. One night Debbie and her friends were having fun at a bar. Debbie was the designated driver. Out of the blue, she felt compelled to leave the bar. She sought out her friends and told them that while she couldn't explain it, they needed to leave immediately. Her insistence persuaded her friends to leave the revelry and join her in heading back home.

The following morning, the big news story was about a violent knife fight that took place in that very bar just half an hour after they'd left. That experience was the beginning of Debbie's journey back home, both physically and spiritually.

In today's passage, the Lord told the people He was sending an angel to protect them on their journey to the promised land. They were to listen carefully to what he said so they would arrive safely at their destination (Exodus 23:21-22).

We may not always see a manifestation of angels, but we are called to heed the nudging of God's Spirit as He guides us along our journey to the place He has ultimately prepared for us.

Father, thank You for Your protection and for leading us as we are faithful to listen to and obey Your guidance. In Jesus' name, amen.

The Heart of the Matter

If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? (James 2:3-4).

Scripture: James 2:1-13

Song: “Jesus, Friend of Sinners”

Each week a woman wanted to take her grandchildren to church, but her daughter-in-law would not give permission. Finally one week, the daughter-in-law relented. When the grandmother arrived at their home, the children bounded out, happy to see her and excited to go to church.

That grandmother later confessed that she was horribly embarrassed to bring them. Their hair was uncombed, and their clothes were rumpled. Instead of rejoicing over the potential eternal impact on their little hearts, she feared the judgment of others and that their appearance would be a poor reflection on her.

James reminds us that a person’s outward appearance does not constitute their worth. We are to treat everyone with honor. Jesus spent His time with those society had rejected—the infirm, the despised, and the downtrodden. When we love all others as we do ourselves, favoritism ceases to exist. Instead, we are emboldened to treat everyone, regardless of appearance, with dignity and respect.

Father, help us remember and live by the truth: that every person is created in Your image and, therefore, has great worth. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Living Faith

Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead (James 2:17).

Scripture: James 2:14-26

Song: “Do Something”

My church has an on-site garden. Each spring we till the soil and plant seeds and seedlings, but we don't sit back and idly wait for the harvest. Although we have faith that the seeds will sprout and the plants will grow, we know we need to be active while also waiting. We need to weed and water. As time passes and our care continues, the fruit of our labor is harvested to bless those who come to our food pantry.

In today's passage, James makes the case for faith and deeds working together. While we understand that faith alone is what saves us, out of our faith comes an outpouring of action.

The garden is a perfect example of faith and action working together. There is no plant without a seed. We could water unseeded ground all season long, and nothing would happen. Our actions alone don't produce fruit. It is that seed of faith that makes a harvest possible. But if we only have faith and do nothing with it, weeds will overtake the plants, choking them and stunting their growth. A lack of regular watering would cause the plants to shrivel and die in the summer heat, especially if rain is scarce. The harvest requires both faith and action.

Father, I desire to accomplish the purpose You have for my life. Equip and embolden me to put my faith into action so I can participate in the harvest for Your kingdom. In Jesus' name, amen.

Can Versus Should

“I have the right to do anything,” you say—but not everything is beneficial. . . . No one should seek their own good, but the good of others. . . . So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:23-24, 31).

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 10:23-33

Song: “The Servant Song”

It was called the Big Bux. Eight scoops of ice cream with your choice of toppings.

The challenge on the wall of Buxton’s ice cream store was for one person to consume the delight in one sitting. Permissible? Sure—they challenged you to do it and thereby earn the right to a second one free. Beneficial? Your heart and waistline would probably say no.

While our appetites for certain pursuits may not be terribly detrimental, it’s still usually good to consider putting on the brakes. Paul sounds the warning to be aware of how our actions affect others; he’s focusing on the issue of Christian liberty. While we may not be bound to the law regarding certain aspects of what we eat, drink, or do, our actions matter. If we might cause another to stumble, we are to set aside our rights and freedom in order to preserve relationships and glorify God in the process.

Putting aside something that we personally wouldn’t be troubled doing, in order not to offend someone else, is a small price to pay for unity.

Father, thank You for the freedom we find in You. Make us willing to build bridges instead of erecting walls. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Second Chances

You forgave the iniquity of your people and covered all their sins. . . . Restore us again, God our Savior, and put away your displeasure toward us (Psalm 85:2, 4).

Scripture: Psalm 85

Song: “Do It Again”

“I forgive you, and I love you.” Growing up, those words comforted me. Although I broke a rule, or did something unkind that required reprimand or punishment, I knew my parents loved me despite my actions. I wanted to please my parents, and it was always easier to behave when the memory of their grace with my previous indiscretion was fresh. But like every child, I was not perfect. Eventually I would again choose unwisely and would have to repeat the process of repentance and discipline. Still, my parents were faithful to love me even when they were displeased with my behavior.

In Psalm 85, the psalmist shares a similar cycle. He is coming to God on behalf of Israel, who finds itself out of God’s favor. He reminds God that He has forgiven the sins of the people and put away His anger in the past, and the psalmist entreats God to do it again.

God’s love is unfailing. The Scriptures and personal experience confirm this truth. But, as verse 8 says, “I will listen to what God the LORD says; he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants—but let them not turn to folly.” Let us listen, accept forgiveness, and not consciously choose to go astray.

Father, revive us again. Cover us with Your mercy and grace as we listen and obey. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Restorative Rest

“Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and so that the slave born in your household and the foreigner living among you may be refreshed” (Exodus 23:12).

Scripture: Exodus 23:1-12

Song: “Rest My Soul”

We often bristle when we are told not to do something. The words “do not” sound rigid and confining. But in God’s economy, they are the exact opposite. They create margin in our lives for rest that restores our weary bodies and souls.

To not work for a full day in order to give ourselves (and all the people and animals that work with us) time for rest might sound counterproductive. We might wonder how our to-do list will get done if we take an entire day to rest. But when our bodies do not get enough rest, we increase our risk for major health issues such as diabetes, stroke, cancer, and heart disease. The immune system becomes compromised, cognition suffers, and we become more accident prone.

God designed our bodies to withstand many things, but He also designed them to be restored through rest. God himself “rested” from His work of creation (Genesis 2:2-3) and commands us to rest from our work.

Father, help us to honor You in our work and in our rest. Help us to be still in obedience to Your command, confident that it is for our benefit. In Jesus’ name, amen.