

A New Thing

[The Lord says,] “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!” (Isaiah 43:18-19).

Scripture: Isaiah 43:14-28

Song: “The New Song”

Both Scripture and history are filled with people who did horrible things and yet later ended up serving God. One such person was Olga of Kiev. Around 945 AD, after her husband was killed by enemies, Olga became ruler of Russia. In revenge, she is said to have killed more than 5,000 of these enemies by shrewd deception and cruel means. Yet several years later, she was exposed to Christianity and committed her life to Christ’s teachings and ways. In time, her grandson would make Christianity the official religion of Kiev.

Sometimes I think about my own past sins and mistakes—regrettable things I’ve said and done. It makes me wish I could go back and have a do-over . . . But wait! In Christ I’ve already received a do-over! When I received His gift of salvation, the Lord made me new (2 Corinthians 5:17). In Him I can quit dwelling on my past, because old mistakes don’t prevent me from serving God in the present.

There are so many examples that reveal to us that no one is too sinful for the Lord to redeem. When we come to Him humbly in faith, He welcomes us.

Father, thank You for making me new. Guide me in Your ways. In Jesus’ name, amen.

January 2–8. **Diana L. Walters** and her husband live in Chattanooga. They develop ministry materials for people with dementia, which she uses in her work at a seniors facility.

His Breath of Life

“You, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them” (Ezekiel 37:13).

Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-14

Song: “Dwell in Me, O Blessed Spirit”

Years ago, I had a recurring nightmare that would evaporate with the morning light. Although I couldn't remember what the dream was about, I could recall the fear I'd felt in the dream over something terrible that was about to happen. What a relief to wake up each time and realize that I was safe!

Ezekiel's vision of masses of dry bones was, perhaps, a terrifying sight. But the rest of the vision revealed a miracle. By turning dry bones into people with tendons and flesh, God was demonstrating that Israel's hope for new life depended on God's power. Sure, it was Ezekiel who spoke God's Word to those bones, telling them to wake up. However, it was at God's direction, and it was God who breathed life into them.

In our own experience, regret over our failure sometimes makes us feel as worthless as a heap of dry bones. But God can restore us! He will breathe life into us if we ask Him. When we turn away from sin and look to Him, His Spirit will refresh us and guide us into God-honoring service in His kingdom. In God's realm, our failure can be redeemed. If we call on Him, He will raise us up to fulfill His eternal purposes.

Father, thank You for the gift of life and for Your ability to restore us. By Your Spirit's power, refresh and renew us today to serve You. In Jesus' name, amen.

The Lord Calls Us to Himself

[The Lord says,] “My dwelling place will be with [Israel]; I will be their God, and they will be my people” (Ezekiel 37:27).

Scripture: Ezekiel 37:15-28

Song: “One by One”

Estranged from her granddaughter, Estelle struggled with sadness and anger. She recalled times she and Amanda had spent together in years past, sewing doll clothes, picking wild blackberries, and even once making a tiny snowman after a rare snowfall. But when Amanda was in her late teens, she pulled away and stopped communicating. Estelle prayed that her relationship with Amanda would one day be restored. Then after two long years, communication finally resumed, and the relationship began to be rebuilt.

God desires unity with and among His people. It was true in the time of Ezekiel when the Lord spoke of bringing together the estranged tribes of Israel. It is still true in the lives of His children today. Yet fractured relationships between people often must wait for one or both parties to be ready and willing to reconcile. In our relationship with the Lord, however, He is always ready to forgive and restore us.

The Lord forgave David when he confessed his sins of adultery and murder. The Lord forgave a repentant Peter after he denied knowing Jesus. And He will forgive us and bring us back to himself when we respond to His call to confess our sin (1 John 1:7-9).

Father, in the areas of my life where I've been shutting You out, I want to be reconciled to You today. Help me also be ready and willing to make peace with others. In Jesus' name, amen.

God's Exceeding Love

“I led [Israel] with cords of human kindness, with ties of love,” . . . declares the LORD (Hosea 11:4, 11).

Scripture: Hosea 11

Song: “The Wonderful Blood”

Mothers tenderly nurture their infants, eagerly watch their toddlers learn to walk, and attentively encourage their children through struggles as they grow. Then mothers suffer through the tumultuous teen years. It's true our children will disobey us at times, ignore our warnings, and go in a direction we know is wrong for them. We often become angry with their disobedience, but we don't stop loving them. We may know our children are making consequential mistakes, but we continue to believe in their potential. We don't give up on them.

Neither does God give up on us. He continues to warn us of danger and calls us back to himself. Hosea 11 is a testament of God's exceeding love of Israel. He loved His people and wanted to protect them, yet they kept going their own way. God knew what was in their best interest, knew that going the way of false prophets meant disaster for them, so He kept calling them back. His love never ceased.

He knows what is best for us too, yet how often we stray from following Him! Still, just as the prodigal son was taken back (Luke 15:11-32) and just as we welcome our children back when they stray, so the Lord receives us when we return to Him.

Father, thank You for not giving up on me when I've gone my own way. Forgive my waywardness and help me stay near the cross, near to Your love. In Jesus' name, amen.

Following God's Path

Brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

Scripture: 2 Thessalonians 2:3-15

Song: "Teach Me Thy Way, O Lord"

When we were growing up, we listened to and learned from parents, guardians, teachers, and peers. As teenagers we were likely influenced more by peers and role models outside our home than by those who were raising us. We were exposed to many thoughts and ideas; some beneficial, some harmful. For example, during my teen years, back in the 1960s, smoking was considered cool, and we didn't know that cigarettes could damage our lungs. Neither did we understand the ramifications of the "free love" movement of the '60s.

Becoming a Christian put a different light on many things I had come to believe. As I read Scripture and attended church and Bible study, I learned that God's teachings about the right and wrong way to live are clear. I had to adjust my thinking away from what the world taught and center on what the Lord taught.

We are warned in 2 Thessalonians that Satan will lie and try to deceive us into thinking the world's ways are OK. We're going to be buffeted by false teachings of the world, but if we hang on to the truths of Scripture, we can stand firm and share in God's victory. That's what our Father wants for us.

Father, I want to live in the light of Your everlasting love. Help me to know truth from falsehood and to proclaim it in my daily life. In Jesus' name, amen.

Encouraged to Continue

Brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good
(2 Thessalonians 3:13).

Scripture: 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5, 13-17

Song: “Let Others See Jesus in You”

In history we read about people who spent their lives performing acts of service. Oskar Schindler, though a member of the Nazi Party, ended up saving the lives of 1,200 Jews during the Holocaust. William Still rescued 649 runaway slaves as part of the Underground Railroad movement. Missionaries all over the world today reach out to the sick and the poor—with both physical and spiritual help. Yet to see the need and not be able to help everyone can be discouraging.

If our hearts are touched by the needs of others, we will experience discouragement of all kinds as we try to help. I once saw a man holding a sign: HUNGRY. PLEASE GIVE. A woman offered him a sandwich, which he accepted but then threw into the trash after she walked away. Evidently he wanted money, not food.

God knew Christians would sometimes become discouraged when performing acts of kindness. He knew our efforts would occasionally be thwarted. He knew that when we testified about Him, people would often throw away what we offer: the opportunity for everlasting life. But with His help and guidance, we can persevere. He will strengthen our faith so we can continue to do the good He calls us to do.

Father, there is much work to do! Strengthen me today that I might carry out all the good work You have prepared for me to do. And please cause others to see Your light shining through me. In Jesus' name, amen.

The Lord Summons

This is what the LORD says . . . : “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine” (Isaiah 43:1).

Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-13

Song: “O Sing of My Redeemer”

Although I did not grow up in a Christian home, I was aware of God’s presence at a young age. And while I didn’t know who Jesus was until I was much older, I believe God began “calling my name” when I was a child.

On the road to Damascus, the Lord appeared to Saul in a supernatural way, calling, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4). Saul (later named Paul) was converted that day and served the church as an apostle of Christ (vv. 1-30). We can read about modern-day unbelievers who also encountered the Lord in surprising ways. Lee Strobel, an investigative journalist and atheist, probed for evidence of Jesus for two years before he finally answered Christ’s call. William J. Murray III was another self-proclaimed atheist. (He is the son of Madalyn Murray O’Hair who founded American Atheists.) After reading a work of fiction about Luke the Gospel writer and physician, William wanted to know more about Jesus and eventually committed his life to Him.

Does God give up on us when we don’t respond quickly? No. My father was skeptical about the “whole religion thing.” It wasn’t until he was 75 and his children had all become Christians that he answered Christ’s call.

Father, thank You for summoning me to be in Your family. Use me to reach those who have not yet responded to Your call. In Jesus’ name, amen.