

## Cleaning the Cobwebs

**John the Baptist came, preaching . . . , “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near”** (Matthew 3:1-2).

**Scripture:** Matthew 3:1-12

**Song:** “My Jesus, I Love Thee”

I have a confession: my house isn’t spotless. The gaps between cleanings stretch long enough for cobwebs to decorate corners and for dog hair to gather like tumbleweeds. No surprise, then, that company coming sends me into a frenzy of dusting and vacuuming.

Imagine the cobwebs that must have woven their way into people’s spiritual lives after 400 years of prophetic silence between testaments. Finally, John the Baptist’s message rings out: the long-awaited kingdom is coming! An excited flurry of spiritual housekeeping ensues. It’s time to prepare! Clear the paths. Clean up. The king is near! But John boils preparations down to one task: repent.

*Repent* means to “turn away from.” In turning *away* from what is sinful, we turn *toward* God’s kingdom and the new heart He provides. Through His mercy and grace, we can turn away from our criticism and anger, toward praise and compassion; away from our fear, toward faith; away from dissension, toward unity and peace; away from shame, toward forgiveness and freedom. By yielding to the call to repent, we will live fruitfully in God’s kingdom and can eagerly anticipate our king’s return.

**Father,** I want to repent today, to acknowledge my spiritual cobwebs and receive Your grace and power to change my heart. In Jesus’ name, amen.

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## Firmly Planted

**[A righteous person] is like a tree planted by streams of water** (Psalm 1:3).

**Scripture:** Psalm 1

**Song:** “I Shall Not Be Moved”

He’s known as the Forest Man of India. At age 16 he began planting trees, hoping to save his island home of Majuli. Flooding of the Brahmaputra River had turned part of the island into barren wasteland. Jadav Payeng vowed to change that by planting at least one tree every day of his life. Decades later, a healthy forest—far bigger than New York’s Central Park—now stands where he began planting.

The righteous are like Payeng’s trees. Planted by streams of water, their roots spread toward this constant source of nourishment, resulting in thriving trees. In the face of heat or drought, their leaves remain green, and they bear fruit in season.

Drawing nourishment from the river of God’s Word helps us thrive as believers. Sometimes, though, I’m guilty of reading God’s Word simply so I can check it off my to-do list. Then I remember that the Word became flesh (John 1:14). Reading the Bible and dwelling with its God-breathed message is an act of loving Jesus himself (John 14:15, 23-24; 15:10). The Word teaches us, protects us, and equips us. It offers guidance, hope, faith, strength, understanding, and wisdom. When we treasure the gift of His Word and store it in our hearts and minds, we can flourish like trees beside the stream.

**Father**, fill me with Your Word so that it becomes absorbed into my every thought. May it be my hidden source of strength, rooting me firmly in Your righteous ways. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Copying the Master

**Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves** (2 Corinthians 13:5).

**Scripture:** 2 Corinthians 13:1-10

**Song:** “I Will Follow”

For centuries, artists have learned by copying the masters. Even Michelangelo copied the works of Giotto to hone his skills. To recreate a painting, apprentices have to study it, noticing composition, textures, brushstrokes, and palette. Their imitations may fall short of the original, but by aiming for the master’s quality, they polish their skills.

Paul wanted the Corinthian believers to do likewise in their walk with Christ: to aim to be like Him. False teachers had infiltrated the church at Corinth, challenging Paul’s authority. The church was a mess of dissension, doubt, and sin. Like a parent counting to three, Paul gave the church one last chance to make changes before he arrived (2 Corinthians 13:10). Hoping not to have to dole out discipline, Paul prayed they would be fully restored (v. 11).

In our own experience, we can follow Paul’s instructions to examine ourselves and test ourselves against Christ’s example. With God’s Spirit working in us, we can learn to imitate our master. Our hearts can become sensitive to what breaks His heart. We can emulate His unwavering obedience. We can recall how He washed the disciples’ feet and then humbly serve others. Aiming for the perfection of Christ, we fall short, but as we keep following His example, our lives will begin to look increasingly like His.

**Father,** as I seek to become more and more like Jesus, help me to be a diligent student, examining myself according to the standard of Your Word. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Search My Heart

**Search me, God, and know my heart** (Psalm 139:23).

**Scripture:** Psalm 139:11-18, 23-24

**Song:** “Search Me, O God”

Years ago, we took our son to a pizza parlor that had ball pits, noise, and games. His favorite game was Whac-A-Mole. Wielding a rubber sledgehammer, he'd whack the moles as they popped up, faster and faster. Later when I faced a series of miscarriages, I began to feel like I was in a Whac-A-Mole game. Every time I poked my head out from one loss, I got whacked with another. Overwhelmed with grief, I felt unloved by God. Since I believed God had abandoned me, being tested by Him felt threatening, even punishing.

David's words in Psalm 139 transformed me and eased my heart. God isn't out to get us. He's the artist who crafted us (vv. 13-16)! We're more cherished than any of His other masterpieces, more stunning than a sunrise over a fog-filled valley! His thoughts toward us are beyond counting. We can trust Him to search us.

In life's toughest times, we can feel like a mole in an arcade game, whacked so hard and so often that we wonder whether God cares. David reminds us that God does care. Our Creator envisioned us before time began, and He loves us so generously that He died for us. Being assured of this, we can offer Him our hearts, trusting that He will work in us, not to punish, but to lead us closer to Him.

**Father**, thankful for Your love, I trust You to search me and bring me closer to You. In Jesus' name, amen.

## Midlife Crisis

**Remember your Creator** (Ecclesiastes 12:1).

**Scripture:** Ecclesiastes 12

**Song:** “O God, Our Help in Ages Past”

In 1957, psychoanalyst Elliott Jaques introduced a new concept at the meeting of the British Psycho-Analytical Society. He observed that some people experience a crisis of depression and anxiety when they reach the peak of middle-age. Instead of the fulfillment they’d anticipated, they see their future as a downhill slope of disappointment, accelerating to the end of life. To describe this condition, Jaques coined the phrase “midlife crisis,” which was popularized when he published a paper on the topic in 1965.

Ecclesiastes 12 provides an explicit look at life’s downhill slope. The writer paints word-pictures of stooped bodies, white hair like almond blossoms, and birdsongs that fade with hearing loss. If we add up the mounting decline of our earthly bodies, we can tumble into crisis. But this passage offers an alternative: no matter our life stage or struggles, we can turn our thoughts to our Creator.

When we remember God it prompts us to praise Him for forming us in His image and for giving us the breath of life. Remembering Him turns our focus away from the world and toward a deepening devotion to Him. We can remember Him by reading His words, which are wise, upright, and true. Like goads, they guide us up and down life’s mountain. Like embedded nails, they fix us firmly on Him. As we remember our Creator’s love and mercy, we won’t just grow older but also ever closer to Him.

**Father,** today I will turn my focus away from the world and toward You, my Creator. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Designed to Grow

**[Jesus said,] “The kingdom of heaven is like. . .”** (Matthew 13:24, 31, 33).

**Scripture:** Matthew 13:24-33

**Song:** “Your Kingdom, O God, Is My Glorious Treasure”

A seed has one job: to grow. If it's a healthy seed, when nurtured with sun, water, and nutrients, it will germinate and grow. A 2-millimeter wheat seed can become a plant 4 feet tall, and a mustard seed of 1 or 2 millimeters can produce a 20-foot-tall tree. The size of a plant at maturity has little to do with the size of its seed. A tiny seed simply grows as much as it can.

Jesus reveals the mystery of the kingdom of Heaven by comparing it to the growth of plants. In His parable of the weeds, the good seeds are the children of the kingdom. Surrounded by weeds of temptation and evil, they grow and bear fruit. Jesus also compares the growth of the kingdom to a mustard seed. Though its beginning is small, it grows into a tree that shelters others. In still another parable, He compares the growth of believers to yeast: slowly, silently the kingdom of Heaven spreads within and alters their lives.

When we believe, Jesus plants the seed of the gospel in our hearts. With God's grace, it flourishes. We become more rooted in our faith. Our knowledge and love grow. As faith matures, we bear fruit to offer others. We can nurture this growth through the reading of God's Word, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and worship of the one who has sown us.

**Father,** may I be a good seed, nurtured by You to grow just as You have planned. In Jesus' name, amen.

## Mysteries Abound

**[Jesus'] disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable"** (Matthew 13:36).

**Scripture:** Matthew 13:34-43

**Song:** "Open My Eyes, That I May See"

My obsession with mysteries began with *Nancy Drew* and *The Hardy Boys*. By age 12, I'd read every mystery book on the shelves of our community library. Today, I love sharing mysteries with my third-grade students. We become detectives, tracking clues and suspects, motives and opportunities. We ask questions, propose theories, and defend our predictions with evidence. But despite these best efforts, students don't always discover the solution until it's revealed at the end of the book.

God has mysteries to reveal—"things hidden since the creation of the world" (Matthew 13:35). Jesus used parables to help reveal, clue by clue, the mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven. As His disciples listened to and watched Jesus, bit by bit, their understanding grew. Sometimes, though, they were stumped. Unable to make sense of the clues, they asked Jesus to explain the mystery.

Our lives are full of mysteries. Despite our best efforts, our marriages or our finances may fall apart. We may lose good people, while those who practice wickedness live on. It's okay to wonder about what perplexes us and to ask God to help us understand what He wants us to know. We can read His Word intently, searching for clues. We can pray and wait for understanding. But most important, we can have faith, trusting that God has a plan, a purpose in the mystery that will bring Him glory.

**Father**, open my eyes, my ears, my heart. I need to know and trust You more. In Jesus' name, amen.