

A Vital Operation

Jesus replied, “. . . No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” (John 3:3).

Scripture: John 3:1-9

Song: “Born Again”

My great-grandson, Joseph, was born with biliary atresia, a rare condition of the liver and bile ducts. When he turns one year old, he will undergo a liver transplant in hopes of enriching his life with vitality and growth.

Nicodemus needed a new birth to give him eyes to see and a heart to understand the mysteries of God’s kingdom. This birth from above would provide him—and any who would trust in the Lord Jesus Christ—with new life, rich with spiritual growth and vitality. Jesus told the perplexed religious leader that his religion of works was insufficient to gain entrance to the kingdom of God. He needed an operation that only the Holy Spirit could perform. He needed what God had promised through Ezekiel the prophet: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 36:26).

The doctors cannot make promises for baby Joseph, but the promises of God are sure. Those who are born of the Spirit will not only see God’s kingdom at work in their lives but will also enter its gates.

Father, thank You for the work of Your Spirit. Like the wind, I cannot see Him, but I rejoice in His transforming power in my life. In Jesus’ name, amen.

July 31–August 6. **Sandra Vosburgh** lives in South Carolina. She is a pastor’s wife and director of women’s ministries.

The Consolation of Divine Love

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

Scripture: John 3:10-21

Song: “Jesus Loves Even Me”

The author of today’s song, Philip Bliss (1838–1876), grew up in poverty on a farm in rural Pennsylvania. At a young age his talent for music was apparent, and at the age of 12 he committed himself to the Lord’s service. Later, Bliss moved to Chicago, where D. L. Moody invited him to serve alongside him in evangelistic ministry. In contrast to the many songs that spoke of our love for Jesus, Bliss wanted a song that testified of God’s love for us, and so he wrote “Jesus Loves Even Me.”

Songs, poems, and even the words in today’s reading cannot fully describe the depths of God’s love for humankind. He was grieved over our darkness, our lost condition. We needed light. We needed redemption. So God gave the world the unspeakable gift of His Son, Jesus Christ. By Jesus’ sinless life, death on the cross, and resurrection from the dead, He paid the full wages of our sin so that all who place their faith in Him will receive the promise of eternal life.

I pray you will not lose the consolation of divine love, though, by thinking of it as for the world only. Consider God’s love for you *personally*. Yes, He loves the world. But He loves *you*. Yes, you.

Father, let the comfort of this truth sink deeply into my soul: You love even me. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Faith over Fear

[Jesus said,] “Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it” (Matthew 16:25).

Scripture: Matthew 16:21-28

Song: “Beneath the Cross of Jesus”

The movie *Sabina: Tortured for Christ* tells the story of Sabina (1913–2000) and Richard (1909–2001) Wurmbrand, Romanian Jews who faced imprisonment during World War II. At one point in the movie, Sabina and Richard make the decision—based on Matthew 16:25—not to flee to save themselves. Regardless of personal cost, they would remain in Romania and serve as they could for Christ’s sake.

In North America, we know little of this type of persecution. But we face challenges and temptations daily. Each day we have the opportunity to deny what our flesh would desire and to follow Christ instead. I once told my Sunday school class that I don’t mind *carrying* my cross (bearing the stigma of being a Christian), but I resist *being nailed* to it (yielding my will fully to God). Yet, crucifying our self-will is necessary if we are to truly lose our lives for Christ’s sake.

During their lifetimes, Richard and Sabina Wurmbrand served the persecuted church around the world. Their willingness to lay down their lives for the sake of God’s kingdom has borne lasting fruit. Today we can take up our cross, rejoicing. By denying ourselves and following Christ, we will find the life God has for us and fulfill the true purpose for which He has saved us.

Father, give me grace to deny myself, strength to pick up my cross, and faith to follow You. In Jesus’ name, amen.

No-Fog Area

[God said,] “I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you” (Isaiah 44:22).

Scripture: Isaiah 44:21-28

Song: “Redeemed, How I Love to Proclaim It!”

Through the mountains of Virginia, “Fog Area” signs pop up along Interstate 81. When my husband and I drive from South Carolina to Pennsylvania, we dread these areas of reduced visibility as the road curves and dips and climbs. How thankful we are when we can clearly see the way ahead again.

To live in rebellion against God is to live in a spiritual fog. Defiance against God is like being in thick clouds that hinder visibility and knowledge of the way of life. Even as God’s children, there are times we might enter a fog as we’re doing our own thing, knowingly ignoring God’s Word. God loves us too much to leave us in that dangerous and confusing state. When we turn back to follow Him, He shows us the way out of the mist to restored clarity and fellowship with Him. Our Savior is eager to forgive our sin and to sweep away our guilt.

We all have vulnerable places in our lives where the fog is prone to settle. But we don’t need to remain there. Christ purchased our redemption to free us from the power and condemnation of sin. Let’s continue the journey, avoiding the fog areas, until we arrive safely home.

Father, how great and how rich is Your mercy! I am grateful to be Your purchased possession. Use me for Your glory. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Justice for All

[God] saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm achieved salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him (Isaiah 59:16).

Scripture: Isaiah 59:1-8, 16-21

Song: “How Can It Be?”

In North America we are familiar with Lady Justice. We often see her image associated with courthouses, judges, and attorneys. It is the image of a woman whose blindfold symbolizes impartiality. She holds scales representing the weighing of evidence. And her unsheathed sword signifies justice being carried out swiftly and decisively. But too often this ideal of justice goes by the wayside.

Yet it will not always be this way. Our Lord, the judge of all the earth, will soon return. He will measure out righteous judgment on those who reject His truth. How thankful we are for God’s great mercy toward those who put their trust in Him. His compassion sent His Son to take upon himself our guilt. As our advocate, Jesus Christ pleads our case, offering up the evidence of His own nail-pierced hands in our defense.

Although injustice in this life grieves our hearts and weighs down our spirits, our blessed hope remains. One day the glory of the Lord will fill the earth, and all nations, from the east to the west, will acknowledge His authority as judge. As adopted children of God, however, we need not fear. This righteous judge is our heavenly Father.

Father, Your mercy and grace are amazing. You provided the only One who could commute our sentence of death. Thank You! In Jesus’ name, amen.

Responding to God's Mercy

This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works (Titus 3:8, *KJV*).

Scripture: Titus 3:1-8

Song: "Surely Goodness and Mercy"

We have always loved books in our home. Our shelves are lined with both contemporary and classic works, fiction and nonfiction. We handle them with care, and antique volumes are placed in prominence and held upright and steady with bookends.

In today's passage we find the "bookends" of good works. Between the challenge to be ready to do good (vs. 1) and to be careful to do good (vs. 8), we are told of the work our heavenly Father performed on our behalf through Jesus Christ. His mercy alone drew us to salvation. His grace alone gave us His Holy Spirit, that we might be empowered to obey this command to maintain good works. Paul instructs us that if we are tempted to speak evil of someone or to be unkind and unloving, we should recall where we came from and who we were before and without salvation.

A commitment to good works will keep our responses upright and our relationships stable. As we remember the love and kindness God bestowed on us in that He saved us by His mercy, we will respond with grace toward those who would tempt us to speak evil.

Father, thank You for Your lovingkindness toward me, Your child. By Your Spirit, make me be ready and able to do what is right and good. In Jesus' name, amen.

Rusted Chains

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law (Galatians 5:22-23).

Scripture: Galatians 5:13-26

Song: “Where the Spirit of the Lord Is”

Years ago, I walked with my husband through the woodlot his grandfather had left him. A slightly deformed oak tree stood near the lane. Its growth had been hindered by an old rusted chain it still wore tightly around its trunk. The tree had attempted growth despite the chain, yet it failed to develop to its full potential.

Allowing our flesh to control how we live will prove to be the chain that hinders our spiritual growth. Some who were part of the Galatian church attempted to mix law with grace as a recipe for salvation. As a result, divisions and arguments arose in the church, and the law of love for one another was being disregarded. Paul warned them to be careful lest they devour one another. Self-promotion, jealousies, and provocations are not fruit of the Holy Spirit. They are evidence that we are fulfilling the passions of the flesh to the detriment of the body.

My husband returned to the woodlot with a bolt cutter and broke the chain. And if we hope to bear the fruit of a spirit-filled life, we must follow Christ into the freedom He offers from the stranglehold of sin. Only then will we flourish, and the fruit of the Holy Spirit will soon adorn our branches.

Father, I ask that the fruit of Your Spirit would be seen in me today. May my words and actions honor You. In Jesus' name, amen.