

## Keeping Up

**I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want** (Philippians 4:12).

**Scripture:** Philippians 4:10-19

**Song:** “Enough”

Some people finished their gift shopping months ago, while others will wait until Christmas Eve to even begin. Likely a few folks are panicking today, thinking that they haven't bought enough—or at least not enough to keep up with everyone else. They're stressed by the idea of another family buying something for their children that is significantly more exciting than what they were able to buy or maybe more than what they can reciprocate.

This perspective puts too much emphasis on the riches of this world instead of on the provisions and blessings of God. While there's nothing wrong with generous giving at Christmastime, being content with the blessings of health and family is just as important. Today's passage reminds us that Paul had learned to be content in any and all circumstances.

Maybe you're feeling stressed by the pressure the culture puts on us during this season. Let's slow down and take inventory of the ways God has blessed us and be satisfied with what we have and are able to give.

**Father**, as the days approach to celebrate Christmas, I'll be content with how You have blessed me and with what I am realistically able to give others. In Jesus' name, amen.

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December 18–24. **Mark Williams** is a pastor, college professor, and freelance writer who lives with his wife and children near York, Pennsylvania.

## Coming to the Rescue

**“Because he loves me,” says the LORD, “I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name”** (Psalm 91:14).

**Scripture:** Psalm 91:1-16

**Song:** “Rescue the Perishing”

Many of the most beloved fairy tales involve a heroine being rescued from an evil villain by a tall, dark, and handsome hero. The power of the story comes from the victory of good over evil. Whether being rescued from a tower, an evil stepmother, or some other menace, the plot always plays out the same, with the hero and heroine riding off into the sunset together and living “happily ever after.”

Two thousand years ago, God’s people were walking in darkness, imprisoned by their own brokenness and sin. The psalmist envisioned a time when God would come to their rescue, and this rescue did finally come in the form of the baby Jesus, born in a stable in a small town in the remote countryside. Jesus would walk the road from the cradle to the cross to bring life to those who would trust in Him.

As we prepare to celebrate next week with our family and friends, it could be easy to forget that the Christmas story is truly a rescue story. May our hearts be filled with the joy of knowing that God loves us beyond our comprehension and that He sent Jesus to rescue us and give us eternal life!

**Father,** thank You for coming to my rescue—for bringing me out of the darkness and into Your light. I praise You for providing this gift of abundant life! In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Fortunes Restored

[God said,] “I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten—the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm—my great army that I sent among you” (Joel 2:25).

**Scripture:** Joel 2:18-27

**Song:** “Greater”

For more than 100 years, Kodak was the most recognizable name in photography. However, in the late 1990s, digital photography came on the scene, and Kodak speculated that it was only a passing fad. This proved to be an unfortunate miscalculation that led to the company filing for bankruptcy in January of 2012. Though this could have been the end for Kodak, the company rebounded and resurfaced as a technology company focused on imaging. In 2021, the company boasted a net income of \$24 million.

In today’s passage the prophet tells of a time when the land of Judah would become bankrupt from an intense season of drought and famine. There would be much loss and suffering but, in time, through the Lord’s mercy, the fortunes of the people would be restored. Though what was lost could not be regained, God would give them hope for the days to come.

Still today, God’s people often make mistakes that cost them decades of joy and peace. Many feel their sinful choices have disqualified them from God’s grace and that there is no hope for restoration. The Christmas season reminds us that God sent Jesus to earth to bring salvation and restoration to *all* who will receive Him.

**Father**, remind me today that Your grace is greater than all my sins, failures, and mistakes. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Coming Home

**[The angel said,] “He [John] will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God” (Luke 1:16).**

**Scripture:** Luke 1:5-17

**Song:** “The Heart of Worship”

When I was growing up, children knew the sound of their mother’s voice or whistle as the call to come and “wash up” for dinner. After hours of playing out in the summer sun, when that call came, bare feet went pounding down the sidewalk. You didn’t want to be late getting home!

In the time of Zechariah, God had been silent for more than 400 years, and His people had wandered far from His path. In His infinite wisdom, God knew it was time to intercede in His creation once again. As a prelude to the birth and ministry of Jesus, God would send Zechariah’s son, John, to bring a message of repentance, calling God’s people back to righteousness. John would come in the spirit of the prophet Elijah, breaking the silence with a new message of God’s love for His people.

In the same way that we knew and listened to our mother’s voice as children, we can learn to hear and know the voice of God as well. As we walk closely with God through the years, we learn to sense when we are wandering from His path and can discern His call to come home to “wash up” and return to walking with Him.

**Father,** I don’t want to delay getting back home to Your will and Your ways. I will respond right now to Your call to return to You. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Imposed Silence

The angel said to [Zechariah], “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. Now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time” (Luke 1:19-20).

**Scripture:** Luke 1:18-25

**Song:** “Word of God, Speak”

In today’s busy way of life, times of silence have become quite rare. From the moment the alarm goes off, some folks try to fill every minute with sound, including turning on “white noise” at night to help them sleep. As a result, most people are never alone with their own thoughts.

This was not the case for the priest Zechariah after he was visited by an angel of God. Because he hesitated to believe what the angel told him, his ability to speak was taken away. This gave Zechariah plenty of time to contemplate God’s power and to reflect on God’s desire to answer the prayers of those who faithfully serve Him.

In a world of busyness and noise, it is vital that we find time when we can be alone in God’s presence to read His Word, to reflect on His commands and promises, and to respond in the strength of His Holy Spirit. By shutting out the noise of our electronic devices and their demands on our time and attention, we can set aside space to be still before God.

**Father,** today as I spend quiet moments in Your presence, may my heart receive and believe Your Word. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Without a Doubt

**Then [Jesus] said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe” (John 20:27).**

**Scripture:** John 20:19, 24-29

**Song:** “Only Believe”

Most North American children grow up believing in Santa Claus as the great giver of Christmas gifts—that is, until they grow older and begin suspecting that Santa’s work is in fact their parents buying gifts for them. Doubts usually start when a friend or sibling boldly declares that Santa doesn’t exist or when the child finds Christmas gifts hidden in a closet. Eventually, the whole myth falls apart under the weight of mounting evidence against Santa’s existence.

While many of the other disciples had seen the resurrected Jesus with their own eyes, Thomas had not yet. The grieving disciple needed clear evidence before he’d be willing to believe Jesus was alive. Unless Thomas could see the risen Jesus for himself, he refused to believe. When Jesus came into the Upper Room, He gave Thomas definitive proof that He was indeed alive, risen from the grave.

It is easier to doubt than to believe what you can’t see; such believing requires faith. Thomas eventually responded in faith because he could see and touch Jesus. But even though we cannot touch the scars of Jesus, we can have faith that His love for us is real and His sacrifice will bring us life!

**Father,** today help me believe in You and not doubt. Strengthen my faith in Your Word and in Your unfailing love for Your people. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Never Alone

**[The angel told Mary,] “Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month” (Luke 1:36).**

**Scripture:** Luke 1:36-45, 56

**Song:** “Away in a Manger”

Expecting a baby can be one of the most exciting and stressful seasons in life. It sets in motion months of planning and dreaming, complete with big announcements and joyous months of preparation. The crib must be purchased and put together, car seats have to be acquired and installed, and the nurseery needs to be painted and decorated. Along the way, hopefully there will be lots of support from family and friends.

When the angel appeared to Mary, he told her the shocking news that, even though she was a virgin, she would become pregnant with the coming Messiah. This pregnancy would happen when the Holy Spirit “overshadowed” her (Luke 1:35). Mary was overwhelmed and perhaps felt scared and alone. The angel encouraged her by revealing that Mary’s relative Elizabeth was also miraculously pregnant in her old age. Mary hurried to be with Elizabeth, and together they carried the joy and uncertainty of what was to come.

In this Christmas season, we may be facing times of uncertainty and fear, but we don’t have to walk through these times alone. Even when we think no one else understands, we can find strength in God’s presence and in our relationships with those closest to us.

**Father,** thank You that in my times of need Your presence surrounds me, and Your people uplift me. In Jesus’ name, amen.