

Boundary Lines

The LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; it is he who will save us (Isaiah 33:22).

Scripture: Isaiah 33:15-22

Song: “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name”

When I was a child, I loved jumping off of my brother’s bunk bed. I was upset when my mother put a stop to it, so behind her back I sought my father’s permission. When my parents discovered my trickery, my father had a long conversation with me about honesty and about why rules exist. In this case, my mother was worried that my recklessness might lead to a broken bone.

It can be tempting to think of boundaries as arbitrary joy-killers. But good boundaries in our households, in games, in relationships, and in the workplace are essential. Such rules exist to benefit us, not to harm us.

God has set moral boundaries so we can flourish. We might think that if we were God, we would draw the boundary lines differently in some cases, but we cannot see what He sees. Our Heavenly Father can see the whole picture—the purpose of all He has created, the consequences of our actions, and the best road for our thriving and wholeness. It pleases Him when we trust that the lines exist because He delights in us.

Father, thank You that You set boundaries for my protection so I can thrive. In Jesus’ name, amen.

January 1–7. **Julie Smyth** lives in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and serves in the evangelism and student ministries at her church. She enjoys hiking and long walks with her dog, Peaches.

Faith That Remembers

We have sinned, even as our ancestors did; . . . Yet [God] saved them for his name's sake, to make his mighty power known (Psalm 106:6, 8).

Scripture: Psalm 106:1-12

Song: "O God, Our Help in Ages Past"

One Saturday I received a call from the veterinarian's office about picking up some medication for my dog. After the receptionist explained the options, I asked, "What hours are you open today?" With an awkward chuckle, she repeated what she had said less than 15 seconds before. I had already forgotten!

Forgetting comes easily; remembering is harder. And our minds can play tricks on us. We may remember trivial things while letting go of important ones. We may hold onto painful memories and forget pleasant ones. Or perhaps we paint the past in rosy hues while seeing the present only in shades of gray. We might become so overwhelmed by current challenges that we forget what God has already done.

Today's passage recounts Israel's past and how, despite their faults and challenges, God protected them, saved them, and forgave them. His love for His people was not dependent on their perfection but on His own character and faithfulness. His love for us is steadfast as well. Just like our spiritual predecessors, we often stumble into sin or face overwhelming challenges. Yet we can fully trust that the same God who was faithful in the past will remain faithful now and always.

Father, recounting Your faithfulness bolsters my faith. I praise You for all Your goodness to me. In Jesus' name, amen.

A Better Reward

[Moses] regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward (Hebrews 11:26).

Scripture: Hebrews 11:20-29

Song: “Standing on the Promises”

The 1972 Stanford Marshmallow Experiments tested preschool children’s ability to delay gratification. In one of the tests, researchers had 50 children divided into five groups. Some of them were told that if they could wait 15 minutes, they would receive their preferred treat—a choice between a marshmallow and a pretzel. If they did not wait the entire time, they would receive the less-desirable treat. Each group had a different protocol, making the challenge of waiting more or less difficult. Some children waited, while others just couldn’t. Interestingly, long-term follow-up studies suggested that the children who were able to wait longer tended to have better outcomes later in life, both academically and behaviorally.

Delaying gratification can be hard, whether it entails waiting to eat a tasty marshmallow, begin married life, achieve career goals, or make purchases. Responsible living often requires us to put off what we want now so that we can attain something better in the long run. When we remember future rewards as we pursue our present ambitions, waiting becomes a little easier.

This world offers many temporary pleasures, but none compare to the surpassing beauty and goodness of our Savior. We know that if we hold fast to our calling and faith, one day we will see Jesus face to face. What could be better?

Father, I’m looking forward to the reward You promise. You are my greatest joy. In Jesus’ name, amen.

A Lasting Legacy

These [men and women] were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised (Hebrews 11:39).

Scripture: Hebrews 11:32-40

Song: “Great Is Thy Faithfulness”

Two framed pictures hang in my grandparents’ kitchen: one of an elderly man seated at a table praying and the other of an elderly woman, mirroring the man’s posture. Those inexpensive prints represent a rich reality: two people—my grandparents—who have faithfully prayed for their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Their daily prayers are the foundation of a legacy of faith passed down to three generations.

If each of us painted a portrait to represent our life, what would it look like? We usually speak of a person’s legacy at the end of their life. In reality, our legacies begin taking shape much sooner than that. From a young age, we make daily choices that shape our character, laying the groundwork for our final legacy. Even those who have no children touch the lives of those around them for better or for worse.

Perhaps some of the best questions we can ask ourselves at any age are: *What kind of legacy do I want to leave behind?* and *What kind of legacy pleases God?* Our faith blossoms when we begin intentionally building our lives around loving Jesus and introducing people to Him. Faith, joy, and grace leave a lasting imprint on those who follow us as we follow Christ.

Father, as I learn to walk in daily obedience to You, I’ll seek to leave a legacy for future generations of those who love You. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Prone to Wander

[God] took note of [His people’s] distress when he heard their cry; for their sake he remembered his covenant and out of his great love he relented (Psalm 106:44-45).

Scripture: Psalm 106:13, 26-27, 42-48

Song: “Blessed Assurance”

Andrew van der Bijl mastered the art of playing hooky from church. As a boy, he’d feign graciousness, giving up his seat. Then he’d stand in the back of the overcrowded sanctuary. From there he’d sneak out and could masterfully trick everyone into believing he had attended the service. Van der Bijl disregarded faith for many years and lived wildly as a soldier in the Dutch army in Indonesia. After being crippled by a bullet, he cried out to God from a repentant heart. In time, van der Bijl became known as “God’s Smuggler”—a name he earned sneaking Bibles into Communist countries during the Cold War.

Repentance is a key part of vibrant Christian faith. Like the father of a prodigal, God is ready to respond to the cries of the contrite. We must not be afraid to call on our Heavenly Father after stumbling—or even diving head-first—into sin. He hears our distress, extends mercy, and encompasses us with His great love.

Some sins can seem unforgiveable, as though God’s grace has been stretched too far. But when our pride and fear tell us Jesus’ blood cannot cover our sins, we are wrong. No matter how deep someone has descended into darkness, God is always ready to deliver the one who calls on Him.

Father, thank You for Your grace. I want to repent from sin quickly and walk in obedience. In Jesus’ name, amen.

The Sweetest Gift

The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more (Romans 5:20).

Scripture: Romans 5:12-21

Song: “Amazing Grace”

I did not enjoy spicy food when I was young. I couldn't understand why any right-minded person would add extra jalapeños or hot salsa to their food. Yet my mother did it routinely. I avoided spicy foods until my teen years. That's when my mother told me a secret: spicy foods make dessert taste even sweeter.

Extra spicy chili may be a poor analogy for sin, but it illustrates a key point. Many people today feel that honest conversations about sin make God or Christianity sound unloving. It's true that sin is an uncomfortable topic for us, since we are *all* guilty before God! But it's also true that the seriousness of our moral failings makes the good news of His grace and mercy all the sweeter.

God welcomes a broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17), and it is His joy to exercise grace toward the humble (James 4:6). Sometimes humility can be hard to come by. However, when we look up at a mountain's grandeur, we don't need to manufacture awe or strive for humility. Our humility is a sincere response to the majesty of what's in view. In a similar way, when we keep our eyes fixed on the sweetness of God's grace and kindness, we become able to respond to Him from a truly humble heart.

Father, as I focus on the greatness of Your grace right now, please soften my heart to receive it. In Jesus' name, amen.

Eyes Wide Open

Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see (Hebrews 11:1).

Scripture: Hebrews 11:1-4, 7-8, 17-18, 20-23, 32, 39-40

Song: “By Faith”

When I was a teenager, “trust falls” were a popular youth-group activity. One teen was expected to fall backward, trusting another teen standing behind her to break the fall. I hated trust falls. In fact, the only person I would do a trust fall with was my father. Blindly trusting another teenager scared me. But I had faith in my father. I had ample evidence of his good character. He would keep his promise to catch me.

Many people today confuse the word *faith* with the idea of blindly believing without a good reason. But this is not how the Scriptures define faith. Faith is trust in what is yet unseen, based on the evidence of who God is and what He has already done.

The prophets believed God would send a Savior *because* they had seen God keep His promises. The disciples believed in the resurrection and the gospel message *because* they saw Jesus die and then rise again, as He said He would. The evidence they saw gave them confidence in what they did not yet see. Today and in the future, we too can have confident faith *because* of the disciples’ carefully recorded eyewitness testimony. Our faith is not blind; our faith is trust in a proven Savior.

Father, thank You for giving me all that I need for confident faith in all You have done and will do. In Jesus’ name, amen.