

A Fragrant Aroma

Therefore be imitators of God as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma. Ephesians 5:1-2 NASB

Reading through Leviticus can sometimes be tedious. There are so many sacrifices to keep track of: sin offering, burnt offering, wave offering, and on it goes. But this time through I noticed that the burnt offering was often described as a sweet aroma to the Lord.

That reminded me that there are several New Testament verses that speak of aromas. In the above verse Paul is so bold as to say that we can (and should) walk in love, **just as** Christ did! A life of sacrifice for others is a fragrant aroma to Him.

It even works the other direction (from God to man)! Second Corinthians 2:14 says, "God always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place." What a privilege, especially in these days of pandemonium (or is it pandemic?!). We have opportunities to sacrifice ourselves for others in sometimes very unique ways (thus being an aroma to God), and we can be an aroma to men through spreading the knowledge of Him.

There is one more use of the term, *fragrant aroma*, in the New Testament. It is when Epaphroditus brings a gift for Paul's support. He says in Philippians 4:18: "I have received everything in full and have an abundance . . . what you have sent is a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God." When we sacrificially give, God sees it as a fragrant aroma. Don't miss the chance to be aromatic in all three ways!

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Chronicles 30:1-31:21
 Romans 15:1-22
 Psalm 25:1-15
 Proverbs 20:13-15

Monday, August 3

Wine for All!

"Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house, and prove Me now in this," says the LORD of hosts, "If I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it." Malachi 3:10 NKJV

There is a story from the Middle East of four brothers who decided to have a feast. As wine was rather expensive, they concluded that each should bring an equal quantity and add it to the common supply. However, one of the brothers—thinking he'd escape the expense—brought water instead of wine. "It won't be noticed," he reasoned. But at the feast when the wine was poured out, it wasn't wine at all. It was only water. Each of the four brothers had thought and done alike.

People can be like those four brothers when it comes to giving. "People won't notice if I don't give the tithe." "It won't make any difference." "I can't spare ten percent." "Maybe later, when my personal balance sheet looks healthier, then I'll give."

Just once, it would be awesome to see what happens when everyone in a church gives as God directs. The results are promised in our verse above.

The words of Paul in Acts 20:35 are fascinating: "Remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Those words of Jesus were never recorded in the gospels, but He must have voiced them on numerous occasions—enough that others remembered them as His words. And He certainly lived by them.

A good question to ask ourselves is this: "If everyone gave as I give, what would be the results?" Let's aspire to the words and example of Jesus. God promises to open the windows of heaven and pour out a blessing!

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Chronicles 33:14-34:33
 Romans 16:10-27
 Psalm 26:1-12
 Proverbs 20:19

The Widow's Mite

Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has given more than all the others who are making contributions. For they gave a tiny part of their surplus, but she, poor as she is, has given everything she had to live on." Mark 12:43-44 NLT

The coronavirus has changed and challenged our society in so many ways. During the time when all of our schools were closed, my husband Terry and I would help our church's efforts to take meals to a local trailer park where the children relied upon free breakfasts and lunches at school. One day while we were distributing food, a man drove up in an old truck. He had a crumpled \$20 bill in his hand and told us to use it to feed the children. He didn't have much himself, but he freely gave to others.

This reminded me of the story of the widow's mite. She did not hold back but gave what she had and she trusted that God would provide for her. The application here goes far beyond the coronavirus or times of crisis. In our daily lives we are challenged when our resources are stretched thin. We may have seasons when we are extremely busy . . . yet a widow's mite of a few minutes spent truly listening to someone can make their day. We may have a widow's mite of patience left after a long day . . . yet God can provide just a little more to help us respond kindly to our spouse and kids. We may feel weary and dejected . . . but a widow's mite of encouraging words can be a blessing. We may be struggling financially . . . but a few dollars can provide a meal to someone who is hungry.

All of these things are beautiful acts of worship to God. He sees. He provides what we need. What can you do with the little you have to offer today?

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Chronicles 32:1-33:13
 Romans 15:23-16:9
 Psalm 25:16-22
 Proverbs 20:16-18

Tuesday, August 4

Love: Why So Much Confusion?

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. 1 John 4:7-8 NASB

Love is probably the most popular subject in the world. In every nation throughout history love has been the theme sung about in songs, written about in stories, and today it is acted out on the big screen and television. With all that attention to love, why are we so confused about it?

I read this ad from a greeting card company: "Love is blind and never dies. It remains in our heart throughout life. Experience this never-ending emotion once again with some wonderful love e-cards."

No wonder so many marriages end in divorce! While it is true that love may never die, love is not blind! True love sees the faults and failures of the other person and *chooses* to forgive and give anyway. True love is ***much*** more than an emotion, as the greeting card stated! It is a decision of the will, often when our emotions are pulling us in the opposite direction.

What is real love? How you can experience it in all your relationships? You can experience true love when you come to know Jesus Christ as your personal Savior and Lord. As stated above in 1 John, only those who experience Christ and His love for them are motivated to sacrificially lay down their lives for others for God's glory.

Secondly, those who know Christ have the Holy Spirit. They learn to rely on His power to cheerfully consider others as more important than themselves. This kind of love is purely supernatural, impossible to demonstrate without the Spirit's power: "For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, *love*, and self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1:7; italics added).

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Chronicles 35:1-36:23
 1 Corinthians 1:1-17
 Psalm 27:1-6
 Proverbs 20:20-21

Called by Name

But now, thus says the Lord, your Creator, O Jacob, and He who formed you, O Israel, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine! When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you." Isaiah 43:1-2 NASB (Bold added)

How are you at remembering people's names? I usually try to get both a first and last name—that anchors it down better for me. Chinese names can be very challenging but are well worth the effort. This morning we got a phone call identified as "Name Unavailable." I looked at the number and took a chance—Yes! our friend Jerry in Shanghai, his wife Min (pronounced *meen*) and their son, Sean, whose birth I attended here in Kansas City. John and I were so elated to hear from them 12 years after our last visit. And of course we remembered their names, for God had planted them in our hearts. (Jerry has now sent 400 masks to protect us.)

So it is with Paul in Romans 16. In this letter to a city he had never visited he mentions more people to greet than in any other epistle. He commends Phoebe, who probably carried his letter. Then he starts in with his greetings to couples (we recognize Prisca and Aquila from Acts), individuals, relatives, Rufus' mother, and families. You can see what delight Paul took in remembering all these folks: he sprinkles in "my beloved" liberally and mentions the hard work of many. *Names matter to Paul; they matter because people matter—intensely—to him.* He mentions in another letter: "Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches" (2 Corinthians 11:28).

God says in Isaiah that He has called each of us redeemed ones "by name; you are Mine!" As intensely as Paul cared, God cares more. He died to redeem you; He knows you by name. *Do not fear—He is with you.*

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One-Year Bible Reading

Ezra 1:1-2:70
 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5
 Psalm 27:7-14
 Proverbs 20:22-23

Friday, August 7

Assigning Motive

"If only the Lord had killed us back in Egypt," they moaned. "There we sat around pots filled with meat and ate all the bread we wanted. But now you have brought us into this wilderness to starve us all to death." Exodus 16:3 NLT

When my sons were young and still napping in the afternoons, I was confident they didn't sleep but, at three and four years old, they were thinking up schemes on how to drive me crazy. Undoubtedly, they would get up from their nap and almost immediately get into an argument over some toy or ball. Or they would play so loudly that I would have to intervene to quiet them down.

Looking back, I can see that what I was doing was assigning motives to their actions. I looked at their behavior and quickly concluded it was all about me, how they were making my life miserable and not thinking how to love me.

The Israelites did the same thing. They hastily concluded that because they had been walking in the wilderness and were now hungry and thirsty, that Moses had brought them into the desert to die. Just a month ago they had witnessed God's incredible miracles with the plagues, Passover, the parting of the Red Sea, and bitter water being changed into water that was drinkable. But they had already forgotten God's love and protection of them. Instead, they put their own wants ahead of God's faithfulness. However God in His kindness only a short time later allowed His people to see His glory in a cloud.

Assigning motives usually causes us to slander someone else in our heart and forget God's promises of love, care, and faithfulness. Why? Because we're putting our desires first, above anything or anyone else. May we all repent of this sin and look to see God's glory.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Ezra 4:24-6:22
 1 Corinthians 3:5-23
 Psalm 29:1-11
 Proverbs 20:26-27

Control or Conscience

...fight the good fight, keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith. 1 Timothy 1:18-19 NASB

One way you can help your family and friends to grow in their love for God is to encourage them to listen to their conscience. This is exactly what Paul did with his young friend Timothy in the verse above. He wrote this to Timothy earlier in the letter: "The purpose of my instruction is that all believers would be filled with love that comes from a pure heart, a clear conscience, and genuine faith" (1 Timothy 1:5 NLT).

As leaders, parents, friends, spouses, teachers, or siblings, we are tempted to control others. If your toddler is about to step out in front of an oncoming car, you quickly grab his hand and pull him back up on the sidewalk. He may cry and complain, but you saved his life. You were in control and never questioned your motive. However, there are various reasons and motives behind compelling others do what we want; some can be good and some not at all good.

We may not even recognize that we are trying to control others. When we are pushy about motivating others, even to follow good plans that honor God, it reveals more about us than them. If we don't trust others to do what is right on their own, it actually inhibits their walk with God. How then does God want us to motivate others with a pure heart?

First, do what you are asking others to do. Then continually yield yourself and your plans to God. Third, encourage your children, fellow Christians, and your spouse to be life-long learners. Next, celebrate humility. Also, celebrate critical thinking. Sixth, teach others to pray and ask God to give them wisdom and convictions from His Word. Finally, ask God to give you and them sensitive consciences.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Ezra 3:1-4:23
 1 Corinthians 2:6-3:4
 Psalm 28:1-9
 Proverbs 20:24-25

Saturday, August 8

Seeing God

"If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father and it is enough for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father?'" John 14:7-9 ESV

Life's circumstances reveal the true character of people. If I am boastful in prosperity, then it is revealed that I think I have produced that prosperity and that I deserve that prosperity. If I am kind to people who mistreat me, then it is revealed that I am merciful because I see the mercy God has given me in Christ. If I complain in hardship, it reveals that I am convinced, at least in the moment, that I deserve better and that I believe either that God is not in control of all things or that God is not good.

Similarly, we see in the life of Jesus Christ who God is and what His nature is like. The fact that the eternal, almighty Son of God took on human flesh in order to save us and the fact that He allowed Himself to be mocked and crucified to save all who believe reveal that God is humble.

The fact that God poured out His wrath on His Son and separated Himself from His innocent Son while He was on the cross reveals that God is holy and just, that He hates man's sin and executes punishment for it. Yet, also, that same act of God reveals that He is merciful and gracious and loves sinners.

We see in Christ's death that God was making a way for all who turn to Christ for salvation to be forgiven and reconciled to Him. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead reveals the almighty power of God.

In the good news of Jesus Christ we have already seen how God's humility, holiness, justice, mercy, grace, love and almighty power are revealed. If you want to know who God is and what He is like, carefully study the good news of Jesus Christ in the Bible!

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One-Year Bible Reading

Ezra 7:1-8:20
 1 Corinthians 4:1-21
 Psalm 30:1-12
 Proverbs 20:28-30

Keeping Score in Relationships . . .

Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag, and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered. -1 Corinthians 13:4-5 NASB

Keeping score in relationships will make you a loser. I enjoy sports. I can't imagine playing a game without keeping score. But what works for sports doesn't work well in relationships. When it comes to loving others, we can't keep score, or as Paul puts it, love "does not take into account a wrong suffered."

Here's an important secret about relationships: The closer we are to someone, the more painful it is if they hurt us. That makes it all the more important that we learn the godly virtue of forgiving those who offend us.

Forgiveness is an act of the will. It is choosing not to hold something against another. It is refusing to seek vengeance and releasing our offender to God. It is choosing not to keep a record of wrongs suffered at the hands of another.

Now, to be clear, there is a difference between granting someone forgiveness and entrusting ourselves to them. **Forgiveness** is given freely in obedience to God's commands whether the person deserves it or not. We only **entrust ourselves** to someone who has earned that trust. Practically, this means we must unconditionally forgive all our offenders, but we need not put ourselves in a vulnerable position to be hurt again if our offender has not demonstrated true repentance over what he did to us.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Ezra 8:21-9:15
 1 Corinthians 5:1-13
 Psalm 31:1-8
 Proverbs 21:1-2

Tuesday, August 11

Shouldering the Weight of the World

How blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways.
 Psalm 128:1 NASB

In Greek mythology, the Titan Atlas was responsible for bearing the weight of the world on his shoulders, a burden given to him as punishment by Zeus. You've seen the statues, right? Atlas is kneeling with the world on his shoulders. Do you feel like that sometimes? Life has a way of throwing us curve balls, and we feel like we are holding up the weight of the world. There are so many decisions to make.

Should I marry? Who should I marry? What's the best job? Should my wife work? What should we do about schooling the children? How do we deal with unruly children? Where should we live? The kids are grown, what now? What about my aging parents? So many things to think about. Since we live in the information age, it is very easy to succumb to the internet, and the "helpful" advice of others, or just do the easiest or trendy thing.

But Psalm 128 is such a great stress reliever. The first verse gives us our marching orders. We should fear the Lord and obey Him. He does the rest: "When you shall eat of the fruit of your hands, you will be happy and it will be well with you. Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine within your house, your children like olive plants around your table. [Who doesn't want this?] Behold, for thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord" (verses 2-4 NASB).

What's our job? Fear the Lord and obey Him each day. That means we need to get into His Word daily to find out what He wants us to do and do it. What's God's job? Shouldering the rest of the world's weight. We shouldn't do what God can do better. He's got this, friend!

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One-Year Bible Reading

Nehemiah 1:1-3:14
 1 Corinthians 7:1-24
 Psalm 31:19-24
 Proverbs 21:4

Keeping Score in Relationships – 2

Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag, and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered. -1 Corinthians 13:4-5 NASB

Are we required by God to "forgive and forget" a wrong we have suffered? Depending on the severity of the offense, I'm not even sure that's possible. Deep wounds take time to heal and we should never put someone under a guilt trip—or put ourselves under one—if we can't immediately forget something someone did to us.

At the same time, what Scripture does say is that we are not to take that wrong into account—we are not to constantly hold it against someone as a justification to mistreat her. Rather, we are to desire good for that person—we are even to bless him in the name of the Lord. *We do this whether we feel like it or not; forgiving and blessing an undeserving person are a matter of obedience to God.*

This type of love is difficult, and I'm reminded that we are channels of God's boundless love that He has for undeserving people. When the soldiers drove the nails through His hands, Jesus cried out, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." If there is someone who has driven a nail into your heart, release him, release her—and if God would so choose, let Him love that person through you.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Ezra 10:1-44
 1 Corinthians 6:1-20
 Psalm 31:9-18
 Proverbs 21:3

Wednesday, August 12

Be Resolute for His Blessing

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father's family, and go to the land that I will show you." Genesis 12:1 NLT

In Genesis 12, God gave Abram, whose name was later changed to Abraham, an amazing promise. God also gave some prerequisites to that promise. God told Abraham to leave his country, his relatives and his father's house and go to the land of Canaan, and He would bless Abraham. All the families of the earth would be blessed through him. So Abraham gathered his belongings, his flocks and herds, and left. But, even though God had just told Abraham to leave his relatives, he chose to take along his nephew Lot. Perhaps he thought, "Lot would be offended; it would hurt his feelings if he didn't come along." Abraham knew the right thing to do but maybe he was afraid someone might not understand.

When Abraham and Lot arrived in Canaan, eventually the land couldn't sustain both Abraham and Lot and all their flocks and herds. A lot of strife and division arose between the shepherds. Perhaps it was because Lot wasn't supposed to be there in the first place. Abraham and Lot discussed the matter, and Lot moved to a different part of the country. Genesis 13:14 says, "After Lot was gone, the Lord said to Abram, 'Look as far as you can see in every direction, for I am going to give it all to you and your descendants'" (TLB). I think it's interesting that God didn't speak until after Lot left. When Abraham finally did what he knew he was supposed to do, and Lot moved away, that's when God gave Abraham the blessing.

Do you have some "Lots" in your life? Does the fear of what people will think keep you from hearing the things God has for you? We'll apply that to our lives tomorrow.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Nehemiah 3:15-5:13
 1 Corinthians 7:25-40
 Psalm 32:1-11
 Proverbs 21:5-7

Be Resolute for His Blessing – 2

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father's family, and go to the land that I will show you." Genesis 12:1 NLT

Yesterday we saw that Abraham received the blessing God promised him after he fully obeyed God's command and Lot left. Do you have Lots in your life? Someone who you choose to keep close to you because you're afraid of what he or she may think or do? You may be wondering, what if he gets upset? What if she doesn't understand me? What if he quits being my friend? What if she tells others that I'm not very loving?

Quit being afraid of those people. Don't get stuck in tradition, in what was. God has blessings you haven't seen, increase that you have not imagined! Now do your part: get rid of the distractions, no more living to please people. We are told in Proverbs that the fear of man brings a snare. Also in John 5:44 Jesus said, "How can you believe since you accept glory from one another but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?" (NIV). Often, in our serving people, we don't realize that we can easily be pulled into trying to please people; we forget that our priority is really to please God.

In reality, we love people best when we love God the most. Jesus did not please everyone—He even upset some of the people close to Him. We can no longer be worried about what others will think. No more fighting battles that don't really matter. It's time to set your face toward God and toward His desire. Ask God what He wants you to obey and then do it. God promises blessings. He has so much in store for us, and His blessings are clearer when we resolutely obey.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Nehemiah 5:14-7:73
 1 Corinthians 8:1-13
 Psalm 33:1-11
 Proverbs 21:8-10

Saturday, August 15

One Stalk

Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God. 2 Corinthians 2:17 NIV

This verse has always gripped my heart with just one question: am I living as one "sent from God"?

"His messenger," "His ambassador"—if these titles apply to me, then this should be my life's quest. Every room I walk into, every path I tread, anywhere I dwell among men, I must see myself as sent from God to that one person in that moment.

It's easy to get lost in the numbers, the fields that are white with harvest. I lived in the countryside for 13 years before moving to Fargo to plant our church. Each year the farmer who farmed around my little 8.5 acres of "heaven" had a crop rotation of soybeans, sugar beets, and wheat.

One night, late in the evening, I was out praying. The moon was full, the grain was near harvest, and as I looked out on the fields, the brightness of the moon's glow gave the wheat field the appearance of being snow white. I was astounded and warmly and richly reminded that indeed the fields are white with harvest.

As I strode out into the field and picked one head of wheat, I was reminded that this field is massive, but in my hand I hold just one of millions of wheat stalks. The harvest field of God is indeed massive and ripe, but my call is to one stalk—one person—at a time.

God, only let me see it, God, only let me live it, as one sent from God!

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One-Year Bible Reading

Nehemiah 9:22-10:39
 1 Corinthians 9:19-10:13
 Psalm 34:1-10
 Proverbs 21:13

Be Resolute for His Blessing – 3

As the time drew near for him to ascend to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. Luke 9:51 NLT

When the time came for Jesus to be crucified, the Scriptures say He set His face to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51 ESV). No more going to the desert or feeding thousands. No more waiting at the well for the woman. No more stopping by Zacchaeus' house for dinner. Those things were OK for that season, but now He didn't have time for those things. Those things would now be distractions; His hour had come.

Is God saying to you, "Your hour has come"? If you're going to reach what God has called you to be and do, you have to be like Jesus and set your face toward His goal. You can't let distractions by people or things keep you from your purpose. The enemy would love for you to spend your time and energy trying to win someone to Christ who is never going to be won over. If you change and do everything this person wants you to do, he or she will still find some reason not to like you. As you know, I'm all for being patient and kind, but at some point you have to put your foot down and say, "It seems you have a problem with me, but you really have a problem with Jesus. I will no longer try to convince you that Jesus is the way, or that I am OK."

Life is too short to try and have peace with everyone, especially with people who don't want peace with God or with you. You might have to love some of the people in your life from a distance. Don't frustrate yourself trying to make something happen that they don't want. That's not being disrespectful: that's being responsible to the calling God has called you to and the gifts He has given you.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Nehemiah 7:73-9:21
 1 Corinthians 9:1-18
 Psalm 33:12-22
 Proverbs 21:11-12

Sunday, August 16

Precious Fruit

You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you. Therefore, be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. James 5:5-7a NASB

When I am quoting James 5:5-6, I feel the anger and frustration of James. The world is evil, so in need of judgment. I am "full on" with James: Give it to them Lord, they deserve it. But then I read verse 7 of James 5 telling me to be patient. Patience until Jesus comes . . . Yeesh, Lord, it's already been 2000 years. Come again already. "Keep reading," the Holy Spirit whispers. I do: "The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains" (James 5:7b).

Then the Holy Spirit reminds me that the Farmer in the above verse is God. We, His children, are His precious produce. The rain is the gospel. Jesus hasn't come yet because God is still gathering in His harvest. He is waiting patiently for the later rain so that all His precious produce will come forth.

When I see the evil in the world, I need to look again and see God's potential precious produce. Maybe I can be used by God to bring a little rain upon the lives of those around me, while I wait patiently for the coming of the Lord: "You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near" (James 5:8).

Father, use me to pour forth Your rain upon the lives around me.

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 1 Corinthians 10:14-33
 Psalm 34:11-22
 Proverbs 21:14-16

How Much Are You Willing to Put Up With?

Love bears all things . . . 1 Corinthians 13:7 NASB

How much are you willing to put up with to have a close friend? How long does it take before you say, "That's it, I've had enough"?

I'm not talking about a parent who has grown weary of the kids' behavior or attitudes, and tells them to put their toys away and be quiet for a while. No, I'm referring to calling it quits on a relationship with a friend, or worse yet, with a spouse. Paul tells us that 1 Corinthians 13 type of love "bears all things." In other words, we should never give up.

You may be thinking of situations that justify giving up on a person. Don't write and ask me if I agree with you. I won't be able to answer. Suffice it to say, I agree with Paul: we bear all things; we never give up on a person.

Even if a person has hurt us badly—physically, emotionally, or spiritually—still we "bear all things." Sure, there may be times we need to protect ourselves by putting some distance between us and someone abusing us, but we never give up on him as a person. I know this is hard: we may at best never want to see him or her again as long as we live; at worst, we might seek revenge. But God calls us to love all people—even our enemies—and to do so, we must "bear all things."

Before you begin looking for ways out of a relationship, you should realize a vitally important principle of life: there is no one on earth who, if you get close enough to them, will not at some point disappoint you, fail you, or hurt you. I don't say this to justify hurtful behavior, but simply to remind us that we are all imperfect human beings. As such, we let people down and disappoint them. It's inevitable. And when that happens, you must learn to bear with them and continue to love them.

Submitted by:

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 Columbus, Ohio

One-Year Bible Reading

Nehemiah 12:27-13:31
 1 Corinthians 11:1-16
 Psalm 35:1-16
 Proverbs 21:17-18

How Much Are You Willing to Put Up With? – 2

Love bears all things . . . 1 Corinthians 13:7 NASB

Three things help me bear with others when they have hurt me or let me down. First, we must learn to forgive others. This word "bear with" has the idea of covering over something. To effectively "cover over" what someone has done, we need to start with forgiveness.

Second, we must look for the good in others. Every person has positives and negatives. Focus your mind on a person's negative qualities, and your relationship is headed for the rocks. Choose to look for and focus on their good qualities that have blessed you, and your relationship will grow strong and healthy. If you are currently having relational difficulties, I ask you: Can you tell me five or ten positive things about that person? Have you thought about any of those in the past 24 hours? Have you thanked God for those qualities in that person? Try it; it will make a difference.

Finally, if I have difficulty bearing with another person's shortcomings, it may reflect a weakness in my own walk with the Lord. Do some self-examination. Do I believe God loves me, accepts me, and bears with me? Do I believe God loves and bears with the other person? Am I competing with the person and hoping to position myself above them in some pecking order? Am I secure in who I am as a child of God—secure enough to love, forgive, and serve others?

Once again, no one is perfect. We can hide our shortcomings for a while, but we can't hide them for long if we want to get close to others. And if we want to stay close, we must learn to bear with one another—to "bear all things."

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One-Year Bible Reading

Esther 1:1-3:15
 1 Corinthians 11:17-34
 Psalm 35:17-28
 Proverbs 21:19-20

The Goodness of God

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Romans 8:31-32 ESV

Oswald Chambers said, "Behind every sin is a suspicion that God is not good." At the heart of the devil's temptation of our ancient and original ancestors, Adam and Eve, was the lie that God is not good. As a result of believing that lie, they lost their enjoyment of pure, unmitigated goodness.

If we are to trust God and enjoy God and to have peace in God, we must believe the reality that God is good. God's goodness means that He, Himself, is what is most enjoyable and most desirable; it means He gives what is best, and it means He is totally incapable of doing harm to His people.

The goodness of God is most clearly and most assuredly displayed in the person of Jesus Christ. It is the goodness of God that caused Him to send His innocent Son to become a man in order to bear our sin and its punishment so we could be totally forgiven, saved from the judgment of hell, and reconciled to God. What greater display of goodness is even possible?

If you doubt the goodness of God, it is imperative to focus on Jesus Christ and His saving work on behalf of sinners. Paul is assuring us of this very thing in Romans 8: "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32 ESV).

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

Esther 4:1-7:10
 1 Corinthians 12:1-26
 Psalm 36:1-12
 Proverbs 21:21-22

What is Truth?

Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." Pilate said to him, "What is truth?" After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, "I find no guilt in him." John 18:37-38 ESV

In our current culture it is now very unpopular to say anything that sounds like a positional or absolute. Truth is often presented as subjective or dependent on a personal viewpoint in hopes that this does not offend the hearer who may not agree with our opinion. Christians, in an effort to be inoffensive and winsome, can fall into the trap of making their faith impotent.

When Pilate asked Jesus if He was a king, as shown in the verse above, Jesus could have said, "Well, it depends on your point of view. I am not like Caesar who is very powerful and I know you are particularly keen on him and all that he has done for this empire, which I really respect and all. The kingdom I am talking about is of a spiritual nature from God who really, really loves everyone and is super awesome and stuff . . ." Blech!

Jesus instead responded with the truth. It is objective truth. Even if Pilate did not understand or accept it, it was and is still true, irrelevant of his opinion.

We should not be afraid to respond with the truth even if people do not get it or believe it. It is true not because they accept or reject it. It is true all by itself because of who we are talking about. What is truth? The answer is as Jesus responded to Pilate: Himself.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Esther 8:1-10:3
 1 Corinthians 12:27-13:13
 Psalm 37:1-11
 Proverbs 21:23-24

The Home Inspection

Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Psalms 139:24-25 NKJV

My dad owned a grain elevator and, while he always put safety first and tried to follow government regulations, it seems whenever OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) showed up for an inspection, minor infractions were discovered.

The clinic where I work undergoes regular inspections by the health department and typically comes out unscathed. Before buying our present house 20 years ago, we hired a home inspection company to give it the once over.

A no more valuable inspection could occur than when God examines our lives, or employs others to do so. It can be uncomfortable (you think!), even painful, but it will eliminate worse pain later. One of my life verses is Proverbs 6:23: *reproofs of instruction are the way of life*. Reproofs and corrections should not be rare, few, and far between; rather, we should welcome them just as we welcome in the new week, month, or season.

John D. Jess (author and speaker) wrote this: "The worst thing a believer can do is stifle the Holy Spirit. This is done by rushing past the warning of conscience, refusing to submit to Scripture, refusing the advice of mature believers, or ignoring an alarm from God." W. Elliot wrote: "Sin penetrates the soul as a needle does the body; it will work its way for years, slowly, surely, till it pierces an intestine or the heart."

My dad didn't look forward to having OSHA show up. But let's not lament when God—and others—look into our lives. When was the last time you invited God to do a home inspection—an internal audit—of your life?

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

Job 1:1-3:26
 1 Corinthians 14:1-17
 Psalm 37:12-29
 Proverbs 21:25-26

Sunday, August 23

God's Tender Mercies

... because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace. Luke 1: 78-79 NIV

God's tender mercy . . . I have encountered in Scripture a lot recently. I'm particularly thinking of James 5:11: "We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful" (NASB).

Or how about Lamentations: "The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail (*Sing it with me!*). They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'Therefore I have hope in Him'" (Lamentations 3: 22-24 NASB).

I think God is reminding me that He is merciful. I tend to only see the negatives around me. Sometimes there are indeed so many negatives. But God sees all, and He knows the storyline, the end—I don't. God knows that without mercy we all are doomed. Everyday God's mercy is so abundantly bestowed upon us. He showers us with His mercy continually.

Salvation is God's mercy. A relationship with God is His mercy. Our rescue from hell is God's mercy. Our ascent into heaven is God's mercy. The delay of Jesus' coming is God's mercy. We live and breathe because of God's mercy.

Lord, may I live my life living and breathing thankfulness for Your everlasting mercy. So undeserved, yet so willingly given.

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

Job 8:1-11:20
 1 Corinthians 15:1-28
 Psalm 38:1-22
 Proverbs 21:28-29

Reconciled

... namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them. 2 Corinthians 5:19 NASB

There he stood, looking so glorious. Bezalel had done a wonderful job, expertly crafting Aaron's priestly robe exactly as God had commanded. The garments were made of blue, purple, and scarlet cloth. The ephod was made with finely woven linen embroidered with gold as well as blue, purple and scarlet thread. There was even a matching sash.

Aaron's chest piece matched the ephod and had twelve gemstones mounted on it. Each gemstone represented one of the twelve tribes of Israel. The blue robe that was crafted had pomegranates made of blue, purple, and scarlet yarn attached to its hem. Pure gold bells hung between each pomegranate. Standing so magnificently, Aaron was even anointed with oil which made him holy for the work God had given him to do as the first priest of Israel.

After all, Aaron should have been the first priest. He earned it. He stood by Moses and spoke for him in front of Pharaoh. He helped his brother lead all the people out of Egypt. Didn't he deserve this honor?

Not!! Only a few chapters earlier, Aaron had been roped into making a golden calf for the people to worship. The people were tired of waiting for Moses to descend from the mountain. So the people gave their gold to Aaron who "threw the gold into the fire and out came this calf." This act made God so angry that He was going to wipe out the entire people.

Aaron did not deserve the honor of being High Priest. He blew it. But God is a reconciler. He doesn't count our trespasses against us but, as we humble ourselves before Him, He continues to use us to bring Him glory.

Aaron wasn't glorious because of his new clothes. He was glorious because he was reconciled to God. And so are we.

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

Job 4:1-7:21
 1 Corinthians 14:18-40
 Psalm 37:30-40
 Proverbs 21:27

Monday, August 24

An Offer of Mercy

For He says, "In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you." Behold NOW is the favorable time; behold, NOW is the day of salvation. 2 Corinthians 6:2 NASB

Saddam Hussein is a picture of defiance in the face of offers of mercy. He invaded and took over the sovereign nation of Kuwait in 1990. The United States and coalition nations appealed to him, through diplomatic means, to withdraw from Kuwait, but he refused. The U.S. and coalition forces invaded Kuwait in 1991 and ousted the Iraqi military. They could have gone on to take complete control of Iraq and ousted Saddam, but they let him remain in power if he agreed to stop his aggression and end his chemical weapons program. He signed a surrender agreement stating that is what he would do, yet without truly believing he had done wrong.

Hussein went on to violate the agreement he signed; that ultimately led to a complete invasion of Iraq in 2003, his arrest, and then his execution in 2006. Saddam's refusal to accept and sincerely respond to offers of mercy ultimately led to his death.

We can learn from the consequences of Saddam's defiance when repeatedly offered mercy. All that holds God back from judging mankind for our rebellion is an unobligated patience and mercy that He has declared will not last indefinitely (2 Peter 3:1-13). In mercy, God sent His Son, Jesus, to die the death we deserve so we could be forgiven of our rebellion against Him and reconciled to Him. If we turn from our sin and put our faith in God's Son to save us through His death and resurrection, He imparts eternal love, eternal life, and eternal joy to us in His great mercy (Romans 5:6-11)!

If you have not received this wonderful offer of mercy, receive it today. If you have, joyfully proclaim this good news to all who will listen!

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

Job 12:1-15:35
 1 Corinthians 15:29-58
 Psalm 39:1-13
 Proverbs 21:30-31

Solarium Musings

Then those who sing as well as those who play the flutes shall say, "All my springs of joy are in you." Psalm 87:7 NASB

I finally made it out of the kitchen to the old loveseat in our sunny solarium on a spring morning. In the kitchen during my breakfast of granola topped with fruit and yogurt and a hot cup of coffee, I perused the front page and editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*, trying to keep up on national pandemic developments. I shuffle through yesterday's mail, seeking to toss or file some. Then I tackle my phone: texts first, since personal; next, Family on the Line app, to see what our kids are saying; then WhatsApp for our church women; onto Facebook for what friends are doing (and to promote our son's fantasy book, *The Mostly Invisible Boy*, just out!); and finally emails to respond to work or community service needs. I get all the little red notifications off! This may seem compulsive, but one time I found out through email that my father was at death's door in New Mexico; 24 hours later I was with him—just in time.

But when I get to the sunroom, I breathe a sigh of relief. All the other voices, turmoil, needs fall away. "This is our time, God." I soak in His presence, the gurgling of the fountain reminding me of His fresh streams. I open my Bible to Psalms, Ephesians, then Isaiah 33, a beloved chapter: "Here we read together, God, the morning after our first son was born. Here is the verse I claimed for him. Here are your promises to the righteous man, claimed for my husband. Here is the breathtaking promise—'Your eyes shall behold the King in His beauty' (verse 17)—and the comforting truth: 'For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our king; He will save us'" (verse 22). God is the true center, the pillar against which I lean my full weight. From Him comes the living water. Responding to Him gives power to respond to everyone else.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Job 16:1-19:29
 1 Corinthians 16:1-24
 Psalm 40:1-10
 Proverbs 22:1

Thursday, August 27

Trampled

He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6:8 NASB

In our front yard we have a broad swath of tall sunflower plants—not the kind with the heads full of seeds, but slender ones which put forth bright, golden petals in July or August every year. This 50' by 20' patch was at its widest and healthiest ever this year with the frequent spring rains.

But one afternoon in June, I noticed three wide openings where the tall green-leaved stalks were bent, broken off, and trampled down. I was so shocked—never before had this happened in our 23 years here. What caused the damage? Our best guess is deer in the neighborhood at night.

As I worked in the sunflowers, gathering broken ones and trying to lean bent ones on others to get them upright again, I felt like it was a picture of events in our nation this spring. Without warning a deadly virus killed many and completely changed the way we interact and carry on business. Then with the senseless death of a man at the hands of police, we as a nation opened a national dialogue on race relations marked by peaceful protests, but also great loss to business people and property owners. The shock, grief, and horror over destruction of lives and livelihoods are accompanied by a sharp learning curve on past injustices.

Once we pass through the shock stage, where do we stand? John and I stood with Christians on June 19th for an hour on Troost Avenue in Kansas City, Missouri, praying. Thousands from many churches lined this street for ten miles to cry out to God together for His help at this multi-racial gathering. Lord, have mercy on our nation and show us where to stand with You to be part of a solution to injustice. As our sunflowers will grow again next year, may individuals, rooted in You, be renewed in truth with great empathy and compassion.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Job 23:1-27:23
 2 Corinthians 1:12-2:11
 Psalm 41:1-13
 Proverbs 22:5-6

Seeking Your Fortune

He grants a treasure of common sense to the honest. He is a shield to those who walk with integrity. Proverbs 2:7 NLT

I love Chinese restaurants and knowing that at the end of the meal our dining party will all receive fortune cookies we can share with one another. Here are some of the best fortunes I have seen:

Procrastination is the art of keeping up with yesterday.

You have kleptomania. Take something for it.

If at first you don't succeed, skydiving is not for you.

Some days you are a pigeon, some days you are a statue. Today, bring an umbrella.

Recently my husband Terry baked homemade fortune cookies and put a verse from Proverbs in each one. We took them to our Bible study, and each person took a few minutes to meditate on their verse and then share their application with the group. There were so many good insights that evening. How appropriate to plant these verses in fortune cookies because they are little treasures for us to discover.

I have been reading through the book of Proverbs and spent some time digging into chapter two. It is a charge to wholeheartedly pursue God's Word. Verse two tells us to *tune your ears to wisdom and concentrate on understanding*. We are instructed in verse 4 to seek His word like hidden treasures. I love that. When was the last time you approached your Bible with that kind of excitement and focus? There is a reward found in verse 9 that follows that kind of pursuit: *Then you will understand what is right, just, and fair, and you will find the right way to go.*

Today and every day we are given the gift of opening up God's Word and discovering truths that will encourage, guide, and convict us. Don't miss out on the good fortune that awaits you.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Job 20:1-22:30
 2 Corinthians 1:1-11
 Psalm 40:11-17
 Proverbs 22:2-4

Friday, August 28

The Call to Be Finishers

I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. John 17:4 NIV

John records some of the last words spoken by Jesus: "finishing the work." The work was His upcoming death on the cross to save us from our sin.

Some believers don't fully understand that His "finishing" is just our "beginning."

God delights in our beginning—our decision to follow Jesus, to be His disciple, but it's so much more. God delights in our successes, God delights over all our victories—in our daily walk, our daily responsibilities and our daily assignments as a follower. God desires that we be finishers.

His desire is that we finish well, and that we are always finishing well—whatever the task is before us—as a husband, as a handyman, even as an old hockey player like myself. We must desire and we must seek to finish well.

My prayer this morning is believers everywhere will embrace the call to be finishers. Finishing every opportunity, finishing every responsibility, finishing well with every call upon our lives that the Master bestows. Finishing every responsibility pleases God, but nothing pleases Him more than finishing our work as His disciple.

Let us be committed to finishing!

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

Job 28:1-30:31
 2 Corinthians 2:12-17
 Psalm 42:1-11
 Proverbs 22:7

Treasure All These Things

... and His mother treasured all these things in her heart. Luke 2:51 NASB
Then Samuel took a stone and set it between Mizpah and Shen, and named it Ebenezer [stone of help], saying, "Thus far the Lord has helped us."

1 Samuel 7:12 NASB

At the end of Luke 2 we are told that Mary treasured these things in her heart. This is the second time in two chapters that Luke tells us that Mary "treasured" things in her heart. It is also mentioned in chapter 1 after Jesus' birth and the visit by the shepherds.

It is good to treasure what God does for us, to be in remembrance of it, to "raise my Ebenezer": "Here I raise my Ebenezer; / Here by Thy great help I've come . . . (Come, Thou Fount by Robert Robinson). Mary needed to treasure things so as to carry her through the coming years, through the normal and rough times of life, even to the heartbreak of seeing her perfect Son crucified. I'm sure Mary died again and again in those hours of three days while Jesus' body was in the tomb. I'm sure she reflected again and again on those treasures in her heart. These treasures were proofs to her that Jesus was indeed the Son of God, the Messiah.

After three days, Jesus rose again. He was the Messiah indeed. Mary's Son was and is the Son of God. I'm sure the first time Mary saw Jesus after His resurrection is one more thing she treasured in her heart!

Lord, help me to treasure You and Your Word in my heart. Each day You bestow countless blessings upon me. Help me to treasure them with thankfulness in my heart, giving all the glory to You.

Do I treasure God's gifts, God's works, God's blessings in my heart? Or do I take them for granted and grumble that it isn't enough or done my way? Do I have an *Ebenezer*, a visual reminder of God's faithfulness, His blessings, His mercy?

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

Job 31:1-33:33

2 Corinthians 3:1-18

Psalm 43:1-5

Proverbs 22:8-9

Make a Huge Difference in a Person's Life

Love bears all things, believes all things . . . 1 Corinthians 13:7 NASB

I like the New Living Translation of "believes all things": "Love never loses faith."

It's my belief that *everyone needs someone to believe in him*. I know that the Bible teaches, and I often write about, our need to trust in the Lord and not be dependent on the approval of others. That's true. Still, I've observed that it's a rare person who goes far in life if he doesn't have someone who believes in him when he has trouble believing in himself.

I can trace my call into ministry, or at least the confirmation of that call, to the exact moment a man I looked up to told me *he thought I would be a great pastor*. His faith in me gave me the confidence to proceed down the scary path to which God was calling me.

I can't begin to count the number of times when, as a young Christian, I was deeply discouraged and felt like giving up. I had a particular friend in whom I could confide. He never seemed to get tired of my need for encouragement, and as today's scripture says, "He never lost faith in me."

As time went on, Roz became the person who stood by me, encouraged me, and never lost faith in me. No one knows me better than Roz, and no one has seen me at my worst more often than she has, but she's a wise woman who lovingly builds up her husband and never stops believing in him. *As a result, much of who I have become I owe to her.*

I've had a lot of successes in my life, but one of the things I am most proud of is that Roz and I have believed in people—believed they could be great Christians—when they had themselves lost all such hope. I'm thinking right now of people who are faithfully following Christ to this day, even though they had once given up. Why? Because God used Roz and me to love them enough to "never lose faith" in them.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Job 34:1-36:33

2 Corinthians 4:1-12

Psalm 44:1-8

Proverbs 22:10-12

Monday, August 31

Make a Huge Difference in a Person's Life – 2

Love bears all things, believes all things . . . 1 Corinthians 13:7 NASB

Think back in your life: I'll bet you can think of someone who was there for you when you needed someone to have faith in you—to not give up on you when you thought of giving up on God. Take a moment right now and thank God for that person or those people.

Now let's put the shoe on the other foot. Who do you know who's struggling, who's considering giving up, who's lost hope, who needs to be encouraged? Do you love that person enough to "never lose faith" in her? Can you figure out a way to let him know in no uncertain terms that you aren't giving up on him—that you'll stand with him because you believe in him?

The odds are pretty high that someone in your life needs just such an encouraging word, and God may very well want **you** to be the one to give it. Never underestimate the power of what a supportive word might mean to someone. Never assume they have it all together and don't need to hear from you.

Take a few minutes, pray, and ask God to bring to your mind anyone He wants you to express faith in. *And then do so!*

Don't fake it; don't say it if you don't mean it. Be sincere, but do find a reason to believe God is not finished with that person and has great plans for his or her future—and then love that man or woman enough to tell them so.

You'll be glad you did.

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

Job 37:1-39:30

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:10

Psalm 44:9-26

Proverbs 22:13