WESLEY

RELEVANT
INSPIRED
PRACTICAL
LIFE-CHANGING

WESLEY BIBLE CURRICULUM

ADULT TEACHER'S GUIDE

God Redeems His People

December 2012—February 2013

PERSONAL NOTES

Key Verse

Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.

—Daniel 6:10

Scripture

Daniel 6:[illegible]

Lesson Focus

We endure persecution by entrusting ourselves to God.

Enduring Conflict Faithfully

Engage — Session Overview

It was dirty politics, plain and simple. Certain contemporaries of Daniel felt threatened by his rise to power (6:1–3). Attempts were made to dig up some corruption or abuse of his office by which they could bring him down. However, Daniel was too [illegible] and proficient. Their search uncovered [illegible] (6:4–5). Ironically, it would be Daniel's [illegible] that would indict him. His commitment [illegible] would be used against him as bait, trapping him by a law without repeal [illegible] group driven by what was wrong would [illegible] Daniel for doing what was right.

Examine — Introduction

Daniel was faced with a challenge to compromise something he valued dearly—his devotion to God. Unwilling to surrender, he faced the consequences of his commitment, to discover God's miraculous intervention. It has been said, if you are unwilling to stand for something you will fall for anything. What are you willing to stand for? How long? Usually our commitment remains until its cost is more than the value we place on the issue. Very few things have a value for which we will give our lives. Those who do stand to this end are called heroes or martyrs. Both challenge us by their actions to evaluate our lives and priorities. How far are you

SAMPLE

STUDY NOTES

EVALUATE Ask the class what they did like, didn't like, and overall impressions of last week's lesson.

ENGAGE

Opening

Ask a volunteer to bring in copies of several newspaper and magazine articles that were written to expose some weakness or corruption in a political leader. Have the volunteer read the headlines. Discuss how common this practice is in our world.

EXAMINE

Background

Daniel 6 opens with a change in government. Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, had been killed (5:30). Who was the new king? Darius the Mede. As the NIV footnote for 6:28 points out, it's possible that Darius is none other than Cyrus, the king who subsequently allowed the people of Judah to return to their homeland. On the other hand, Darius may merely have been a governor Cyrus appointed over a portion of his new kingdom.

In any case, Darius recognized Daniel as a leader of great ability and kept him in his inner circle (6:2). (This might be the equivalent of a new national leader, after a change of parties at the head of the United States or Canadian government, maintaining a cabinet member from the previous party.) All other competitors for position envied Daniel. They plotted ways to eliminate him, so that they might move to the top. Because Daniel "was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent" (6:4), his enemies could find no hint of scandal in his administration. They knew of his strong faith in God and, with that in mind, devised a scheme they hoped would take care of Daniel.

In the process, Daniel's enemies lied. They took their plan to Darius, announcing that everyone in the government thought it a

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willing to go in your commitment to God? Your answer to this question will reveal how valuable God is to you.

ONE: Righteous living will evoke negative responses (Dan. 6:10–13).

KJV	NIV
10 Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime.	**10** Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.
11 Then these men assembled, and found Daniel praying and making supplication before his God.	**11** Then these men went as a group and found Daniel praying and asking God for help.
12 Then they came near, and spake before the king concerning the king's decree; Hast thou not signed a decree, that every man that shall ask a petition of any God or man within thirty days, save of thee, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions? The king answered and said, The thing is true, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which altereth not.	**12** So they went to the king and spoke to him about his royal decree: "Did you not publish a decree that during the next thirty days anyone who prays to any god or man except to you, O king, would be thrown into the lions' den?" The king answered, "The decree stands—in accordance with the laws of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed."
13 Then answered they and said before the king, That Daniel, which is of the children of the captivity of Judah, regardeth not thee, O king, nor the decree that thou hast signed, but maketh his petition three times a day.	**13** Then they said to the king, "Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or to the decree you put in writing. He still prays three times a day."

The persecution on Daniel was political. He had attained significant power, making his enemies uncomfortable. Daniel's opponents seem to have been unconcerned about his worship practices. They simply used them as a means to remove Daniel from office.

Persecution is the action of threatened people. And many Christians around the world must face it every day. In fact, it has been said that there are more Christians persecuted today than during the time of Nero. This should come as no great surprise. Christianity, when lived correctly, invites persecution because of its challenge to the world. Jesus warned His disciples of this (John 15:18–25). As God's

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great idea (6:7). They had not, of course, consulted Daniel. The king, unfortunately, believed their lie, and accepted their plan (6:9). The king's pride played a role here. He was a new king. He likely received their suggestion with pleasure. ("Do they see me on a level with the gods? Wow!")

Lots of people today have pet cats, but a den of lions? This would not have been an uncommon practice among Ancient Eastern kings. Hunting for the "king of the beasts" was a hobby of many ancient kings. (See Ezek. 19:1–9, where the "princes of Israel" are compared to lions. Note especially verses 8 and 9, where one of these lion princes was trapped, caged, and thrown into a prison by the king of Babylon.)

EXAMINE **ONE:** Discuss how common playing politics is in the church. Does this practice please God? Why or why not? When church members resort to political attacks, what do you think happens to the Holy Spirit's leadership in that congregation?

6:10 *when Daniel learned.* The new law forbade all the king's subjects from praying to anyone but the king himself. In an earlier, similar encounter between Jews and a foreign king (Dan. 3), a law had required that all people, Jews included, worship an image of the king. In that case, the Jews were forced to commit what for them would have been a positive evil, to participate in a "sin of commission." Daniel's position in chapter 6, is a bit less threatening. The new law did not force him into an act God's law forbade. The new law merely asked him, for a month, to give up his spiritual routine. To remain safe, all Daniel had to do was to avoid public prayer for a month. If hidden in the safety of his upstairs room, or even on a walk in the park, he could pray to God, as long as no one knew. But Daniel refused to play such games.

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message is proclaimed, responses—both positive and negative—are to be expected. Fortunately, few of us will actually face death for our faith. This does not mean we will not experience mistreatment for our beliefs from our society and even the church itself.

The questioning of power brings about harassment. We have discovered that when we kick at society, it kicks back. We immediately cry, "Foul!" We feel society should not react negatively, but rather be thankful for our interest in its problems. But society views the gospel as an invasion rather than a help. Does this mean we should stop our attempts? Hardly. Instead we should anticipate the inevitable.

It is not just society that responds aggressively when threatened. Challenges within a church can result in abuse of its people. Our battles are rarely over faith matters, but have more to do with personal preference, power, and control, centering around status quo and tradition. Change threatens, and threatened people attack. Seldom are the issues resolved. Instead the pastor is "voted out," the church splits, or both, with each side going away feeling persecuted.

It has been said that the only constant in this world is change. Should there not be a better way to handle this challenge among a community of believers, something other than aggression toward one another?

Explore UNDERSTANDING GOD'S WORD

1. Why do you suppose the men went as a group to tattle on Daniel?
2. How willing are you to stand against your community over issues not pleasing to God?
3. As a church, what steps can be taken to respond constructively to threats from within and without?

TWO: In persecution, integrity is our only strength (Dan. 6:14–18).

KJV	NIV
14 Then the king, when he heard these words, was sore displeased with himself, and set his heart on Daniel to deliver him: and he laboured till the going down of the sun to deliver him.	**14** When the king heard this, he was greatly distressed; he was determined to rescue Daniel and made every effort until sundown to save him.

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6:10 *just as he had done before.* Daniel continued to kneel and pray in full sight of anyone who walked by. He evidently prayed in that particular window for that spot's value as a witness to all the people of the city. "You may worship your gods," Daniel may have thought, "but I want everyone to know that I pray to the true God, the God we worshiped at home in Jerusalem." Since the true God was the God of the universe, Daniel's prayers would not have possessed any greater (magical) power because of his posture toward Jerusalem. That window gave Daniel opportunity to witness to the pagans of the city. Note also that Daniel, despite facing the threat of execution, continued to give thanks to his God.

6:11 *these men went as a group.* Perhaps the schemers were afraid Daniel's God might be strong enough to strike any one of them dead. Perhaps for the comfort of numbers, they went together.

6:11 *asking God for help.* Daniel was no superman. He knew he was courting physical harm. So, in his prayer, Daniel asked God to protect him.

6:12 *they went to the king.* Manipulators extraordinaire! They had manipulated the king. They had manipulated the law. "Stubborn" Daniel had played right into their hand. All the way to the palace, they sang the children's taunt, "Na, na, na, na, na, na. We have caught Daniel. Even the king can't get out of this one. He will have to kill Daniel."

6:12 *his royal decree.* The writer of this account, for dramatic emphasis, repeats the entire decree, quoted only five verses prior. The writer is setting up the first-time reader of this story. Compare the repetition here with the repeated line in the story of the three little pigs: "The wolf huffed and he puffed and he blew

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KJV	NIV
15 Then these men assembled unto the king, and said unto the king, Know, O king, that the law of the Medes and Persians is, That no decree nor statute which the king establisheth may be changed.	**15** Then the men went as a group to the king and said to him, "Remember, O king, that according to the law of the Medes and Persians no decree or edict that the king issues can be changed."
16 Then the king commanded, and they brought Daniel, and cast him into the den of lions. Now the king spake and said unto Daniel, Thy God whom thou servest continually, he will deliver thee.	**16** So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions' den. The king said to Daniel, "May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!"
17 And a stone was brought, and laid upon the mouth of the den; and the king sealed it with his own signet, and with the signet of his lords; that the purpose might not be changed concerning Daniel.	**17** A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles, so that Daniel's situation might not be changed.
18 Then the king went to his palace, and passed the night fasting: neither were instruments of musick brought before him: and his sleep went from him.	**18** Then the king returned to his palace and spent the night without eating and without any entertainment being brought to him. And he could not sleep.

What were the headlines in the Babylonian newspapers the day of Daniel's arrest? How accurate were they? Was he described as a villain or a victim? A major trial during persecution is the implied guilt fostered on the victim. In Daniel's case, an everyday spiritual discipline had become twisted into something treasonous. An act so appropriate and innocent a few days before was now a perversion. Daniel, the official who previously was considered above reproach, was now indicted.

In spite of what was being said, Daniel was about to become lion chow. Though there is no written record, one of Daniel's comforts in facing his demise must have been the realization that it was his integrity and commitment to God that had brought him to his fate. One can die for those things dear and valuable. To Daniel, no other option would be acceptable. To refuse his God would cause greater pain than facing the lions. At least when the lions pounced, it would be for noble reasons. How empty it must feel to be destroyed over something trivial or false (as his persecutors would soon discover).

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the house down." (The repetition implied that he would be able to blow down all houses.) A person who knows how the stories end can laugh at the wolf, and at Daniel's enemies.

6:12 *which cannot be repealed.* Note this line repeated in 6:8, 12, and 15. (See Est. 1:19; 8:8.)

EXPLORE

One

1. They probably assumed there was safety in numbers.

2. Personal response called for. It may be appropriate here to ask for examples from people who have taken a stand (for example, peacefully picketing an abortion clinic, working at a shelter to stand against poverty, etc.).

3. A church should maintain open communication among its people so that concerns can be shared and discussed. An emphasis should be placed on the need for love between followers of Christ. If we seek to love each other first, feelings of being threatened should diminish.

EXAMINE

TWO: Compare what happened to Daniel with 1 Peter 3:13–17. How does Daniel's experience illustrate the principle of suffering for doing good? Did Daniel's adventure give him an opportunity to explain the reason for his hope? If so, how?

6:14 *the king . . . was greatly distressed.* What king wouldn't be? Who would want to lose a man of Daniel's character? Who wouldn't regret having been trapped by the rest of your advisors, men of shady character?

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PERSONAL NOTES

To deal with a tough situation, work through "Tame the Lions" on page 104 of Wesley Bible Lesson Commentary 2009–2010.

We have all faced "lions." Our character can be assassinated, motives questioned, integrity maligned, but if above the roar we can hear a celestial applause and the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant," we can stand firm. It is far better to be despised for doing God's will than to be loved for doing something else. Sometimes the greatest compliment people receive is from their enemies.

Explore Understanding God's Word

1. Why might the king have been so distressed over Daniel's situation?
2. How important is integrity when dealing with opposition?
3. How does doing what God desires give strength when facing persecution?

THREE: God will right the wrong (Dan. 6:19–23).

KJV	NIV
19 Then the king arose very early in the morning, and went in haste unto the den of lions. **20** And when he came to the den, he cried with a lamentable voice unto Daniel: and the king spake and said to Daniel, O Daniel, servant of the living God, is thy God, whom thou servest continually, able to deliver thee from the lions? **21** Then said Daniel unto the king, O king, live for ever. **22** My God hath sent his angel, and hath shut the lions' mouths, that they have not hurt me: forasmuch as before him innocency was found in me; and also before thee, O king, have I done no hurt.	**19** At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions' den. **20** When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?" **21** Daniel answered, "O king, live forever! **22** My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, O king."

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6:15 *the men went as a group.* Again. Perhaps they thought the king might become angry and kill any one of them, but all of them? Probably not.

6:16 *the king gave the order.* The king played by the rules. He even sealed the execution room with his own royal seal (v. 17). But the strength of Daniel's faith, and by implication, the strength of Daniel's God, had not escaped the king. He sighed a half prayer: "May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you."

6:18 *without eating . . . entertainment . . . and . . . sleep.* An unusual night for one of the most powerful men on earth. Ancient kings normally received any treats they wanted. (Meanwhile Daniel seems to have enjoyed a good night's sleep with the big cats.)

EXPLORE Two

1. It seems Darius respected Daniel for his service. Perhaps the two men were even friends.
2. Integrity supplies the only durable foundation by which endurance can be maintained.
3. Doing God's will assures that what you have done is correct—even if the rest of the world does not agree.

EXAMINE THREE: According to 2 Corinthians 4:7–18, what point of view will help us remain faithful no matter what happens to us?

6:19 *hurried to the lions' den.* "Has he been able to do it? . . . YES!" As the king heard Daniel's calm voice coming out of the pit, can you picture Darius pumping his fist?

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KJV	NIV
23 Then was the king exceedingly glad for him, and commanded that they should take Daniel up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no manner of hurt was found upon him, because he believed in his God.	**23** The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the den. And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.

Even the best-laid plans of humankind are no match for God. History has proven consistently that God is in control at all times. The helplessness and hopelessness of Daniel's plight points back to God, for God works within the impossible and desperate. Misunderstandings and conflict will bring us into situations we cannot control. But God is in charge. It may take time, but He will work our situation to the good.

It would be nice to say that Daniel's immediate deliverance is the typical result of persecution, but there are too many mass graves and tortured lives that testify differently. One can stand for the greatest truths and still die. A pastor can act for the most noble of reasons and still be voted out. Groups can be motivated by the best of intentions and still cause a church split. For every Daniel there is a Stephen. The lions' mouths may be shut for one, while the executioners' stones soar for another.

However, persecutions can separate truth from falsehood. Any assault made for wrong motives will become apparent over time. This was obviously anticipated by Daniel's enemies. Why else would they have taken such pains to make sure the law could not be repealed? The king was no fool. He saw their intent the moment the accusation was brought to him.

The outcome of persecution is still made right. Maybe not in our lifetime and maybe not until the end of time when the martyrs will find their vindication through God's judgment on the earth (Rev. 6:9–11), but truth lived and shared will always shine in God's time.

PERSONAL NOTES

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6:22 *I was found innocent.* Daniel knew the truth. He could stand with integrity before the king and before the King. "He had trusted in his God" (v. 23).

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PERSONAL NOTES

Explore UNDERSTANDING GOD'S WORD

1. How was Daniel vindicated?
2. From what "lions' den" has God delivered you?
3. What should we do when God reveals a truth about a previous wrong?

Exercise LIFE APPLICATION

Make a prayer list with three categories. The first one should contain all the items you feel threatened by within your community of faith. As you list these, ask yourself, "Are these matters of faith or personal preference?" As you pray, ask God to reveal why you feel threatened.

Title the next category "Lions' Den." List here the present conflicts of your life. Pray that God will strengthen your resolve and take control of the situations so no harm is done.

Third, make a category titled "Wrongs." What wounds from the past have you suffered from misunderstandings and attacks? Pray for healing of all involved.

Finally, if God has prompted you to make peace with someone, do so today! He can bring about the healing you have desired if you are faithful to His leading.

STUDY NOTES

EXPLORE

Three

1. God saved Daniel's life, and the men who accused him were thrown to the lions.

2. Encourage class members to share times when God has delivered them from physical, spiritual, or emotional crises.

3. Go to that person or group and make the situation right between you.

EXERCISE

Closing

Ask your class if they have ever been in a situation similar to Daniel and the lions' den. What recommendations would they make to young Christians facing opposition for their commitment to Christ?

Prior to class try the activity "Guess-the-Secret-Word Collage" on page 102 of *Wesley Bible Lesson Commentary 2009–2010.* Bring your masterpiece to class and see if they can guess the word.

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Examine — Introduction

Daniel was faced with a challenge to compromise something he valued dearly—his devotion to God. Unwilling to surrender, he faced the consequences of his commitment, to discover God's miraculous intervention. It has been said, if you are unwilling to stand for something you will fall for anything. What are you willing to stand for? How long? Usually our commitment remains until its cost is more than the value we place on the issue. Very few things have a value for which we will give our lives. Those who do stand to this end are called heroes or martyrs. Both challenge us by their actions to evaluate our lives and priorities. How far are you

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KJV

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NIV

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20 When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?"
21 Daniel answered, "O king, live forever!
22 My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, O king."

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KJV	NIV
23 Then was the king exceedingly glad for him, and commanded that they should take Daniel up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no manner of hurt was found upon him, because he believed in his God.	**23** The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the den. And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.

Even the best-laid plans of humankind are no match for God. History has proven consistently that God is in control at all times. The helplessness and hopelessness of Daniel's plight points back to God, for God works within the impossible and desperate. Misunderstandings and conflict will bring us into situations we cannot control. But God is in charge. It may take time, but He will work our situation to the good.

It would be nice to say that Daniel's immediate deliverance is the typical result of persecution, but there are too many mass graves and tortured lives that testify differently. One can stand for the greatest truths and still die. A pastor can act for the most noble of reasons and still be voted out. Groups can be motivated by the best of intentions and still cause a church split. For every Daniel there is a Stephen. The lions' mouths may be shut for one, while the executioners' stones soar for another.

However, persecutions can separate truth from falsehood. Any assault made for wrong motives will become apparent over time. This was obviously anticipated by Daniel's enemies. Why else would they have taken such pains to make sure the law could not be repealed? The king was no fool. He saw their intent the moment the accusation was brought to him.

The outcome of persecution is still made right. Maybe not in our lifetime and maybe not until the end of time when the martyrs will find their vindication through God's judgment on the earth (Rev. 6:9–11), but truth lived and shared will always shine in God's time.

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Enduring Conflict Faithfully

Explore UNDERSTANDING GOD'S WORD

1. How was Daniel vindicated?
2. From what "lions' den" has God delivered you?
3. What should we do when God reveals a truth about a previous wrong?

Exercise LIFE APPLICATION

Make a prayer list with three categories. The first one should contain all the items you feel threatened by within your community of faith. As you list these, ask yourself, "Are these matters of faith or personal preference?" As you pray, ask God to reveal why you feel threatened.

Title the next category "Lions' Den." List here the present conflicts of your life. Pray that God will strengthen your resolve and take control of the situations so no harm is done.

Third, make a category titled "Wrongs." What wounds from the past have you suffered from misunderstandings and attacks? Pray for healing of all involved.

Finally, if God has prompted you to make peace with someone, do so today! He can bring about the healing you have desired if you are faithful to His leading.

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vista
Journal for Holy Living

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Ministering to the Least of These

by James N. Watkins

A young mother balances a toddler on her hip as she ducks under the large heating pipes running along the ceiling in the community center basement. She follows small, handwritten signs directing her down the narrow hallways lined with grocery bags of used clothing. Her three other children wait nervously at the door as she enters The Well.

"Hi! Are you new here?" Joyce, the director asks. She smiles and pulls a fresh index card from a small box with over one hundred families on file.

"A friend told me about this . . ." The woman seems embarrassed to admit where she is. "I didn't know it was here. We've just had a lot of doctor bills."

Her oldest son's face reveals the scars of cleft palate surgery.

"Well, we're just glad you came," Joyce says and then asks the young woman's name and address. She is from Fairmount, a nearby town, population three thousand, surrounded by miles of flat, fertile farmland.

"How many are in your family?"

"Eight."

Anna Mae, a volunteer staffer, takes the number as her cue. She begins packing a grocery bag with macaroni and cheese, cans of vegetables, applesauce, small plastic bags of detergent, and toiletries for a family of eight.

Meanwhile Mabel, another volunteer, is cheerfully sorting clothing and hanging it on long aisles of racks.

"Do you need any clothing?"

"No, not today, thanks."

Joyce, Anna Mae, and Mabel are putting Christ's words from Matthew 25 into practice—to care for the least of these in our own sphere of influence. Jesus told His disciples (and that includes us today):

> Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."
>
> Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?"

The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matt. 25:34–40).

There are literally hundreds of ways to put Christ's command into practice, right in our own neighborhoods. Joyce was shocked to read that the fastest growing group of homeless people in the United States is in rural areas. So, she started in her own hometown.

Stephen Burger, executive director of the International Union of Gospel Missions, says, "First, we must develop a sensitivity to the needs in our sphere of influence." He suggests starting small. "Have someone from a local evangelical mission come to talk to your church about the homelessness problem, then go and see. Start with something small—a one-time project. When that generates excitement, move on to long-range projects."

Hungry and Thirsty

Consider conducting a service at your local rescue mission. Help serve meals. One of our family's most meaningful Christmas Days was serving dinner for the guests of the Fort Wayne Rescue Mission. The teens of our church have shared worship choruses, special music, and shared their testimonies at the mission service.

Our church also sponsors a food bank for those in the community. For pennies a pound, Community Harvest sells surplus food to nonprofit organizations to distribute in their communities. Many churches simply collect food for a local food bank.

Have your youth group raise money for hunger relief with a "30-Hour Famine" program from World Vision. Consider including a Christian relief organization like World Hope or World Relief in your giving.

A Stranger

One winter night during the Blizzard of 1970, a man and a woman appeared at my parents' door. Their car had slid off the I-94 exit near us, all the hotels were full, and they desperately needed a place to stay, since the wife was nine-months pregnant. It would have been an even better story if it had been Christmas Eve, but my parents welcomed them in. (My father later confessed that he was terrified she would go into labor that very night with all the roads drifted shut.)

Unfortunately, strangers can be found year round in most churches—those on the social fringe with no close family or friends are desperate for companionship. Invite them to be a part of your family for holidays and special events. We've tried to include widows and singles in our church in our social activities such as school plays, concerts, or simply going out to eat.

One of our family's most meaningful Christmas Days was serving dinner for the guests of the Fort Wayne Rescue Mission.

Considering adopting someone as a grandparent or sibling.

Needing Clothing

Need to clean out your closets? Consider giving your good, used clothing to Goodwill, the Salvation Army, or a mission agency. Do not, however, view it as an opportunity to get rid of Nehru jackets and polyester leisure suits. My wife and I recently spoke throughout southern Africa and saw some of the fashion nightmares that must have emerged out of the missions barrel—not simply out-of-style clothing, but stained and torn with buttons missing.

While there, one of the native pastors admired the national missions director's necktie. The executive immediately pulled it off and presented it to the surprised but delighted pastor. That's putting Matthew 25 into practice.

Sick

I spent one fall in three hospitals for four surgeries, and only one layperson came to visit me—and I was one of the ministers at a church! I tried to remember that very few people enjoy visiting hospitals. (I get queasy whenever patients start describing their surgery or, worse, want to show me their incision. Maybe I'm too empathetic—I even get labor pains when visiting the maternity ward!) But visiting the sick is one of Christ's commands.

And don't forget the family members who need attention. The best ministry I ever received while sitting in the intensive care waiting room while my wife was in critical condition was a layperson who spent the afternoon playing Uno with me. (Imagine, a ministry of card playing!)

At least send a card or an e-mail greeting.

In Prison

Again, start in your own sphere of influence. As a youth pastor and then pastor, I had plenty of opportunities to visit parishioners in juvenile detention centers, county jails, and closed sections of mental hospitals. (Most lockups allow ministers' visitation.)

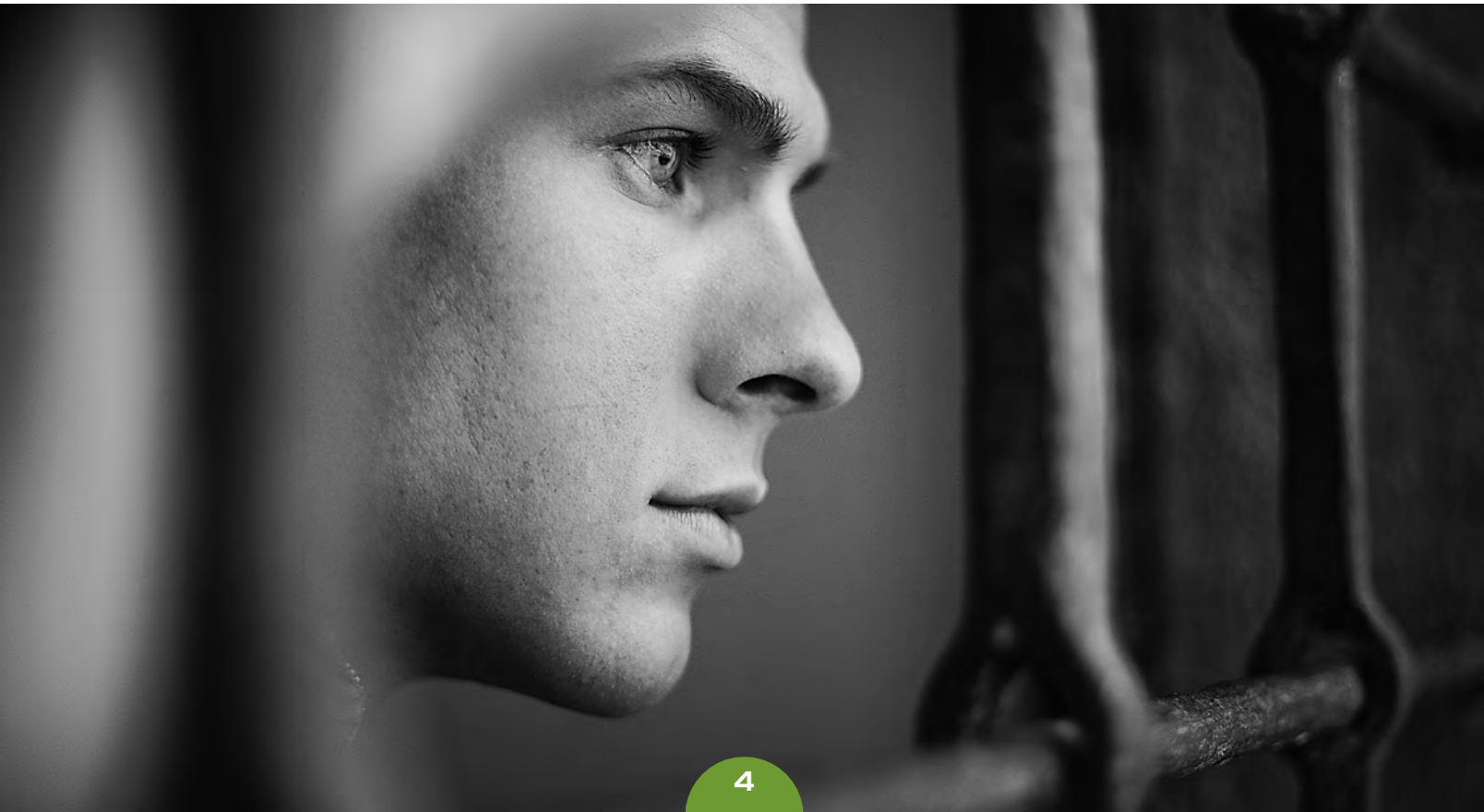
Admittedly, hearing a series of steel doors lock behind you as you're led to the visitors' holding cell is just a bit disconcerting, but those behind bars are so appreciative of your efforts.

Consider supporting Christian prison ministries such as Chuck Colson's Prison Fellowship. Send letters to political prisoners through international organizations. (They will even send you helpful information as to what to write and what not to write.)

Start small with what you have and see where Christ leads you.

Flo describes herself as "just a housewife with no real job skills," but she started out serving at a soup kitchen a few days a week and ended up being the director. Randy and Peggy remodeled the second floor of their large house into apartments for homeless veterans. Don owns a huge manufactured home dealership and started tithing brand-new homes to needy families in his community.

Joyce waves goodbye to the young mother and the three children who are each carrying a bag of groceries and toiletries. "We're here to serve the Lord," Joyce tells me. "And it does feel good to be able to help in a small way."



A Blessing for Sarah

by Verna Cole Mitchell

Sarah put her hands up to her face and sobbed. Tears ran down the insides of her fingers to her palms. Her world had been shaky for a long time, but now it was crashing down around her. Her mind was anxious and her heart heavy. She thought of how sad it was to grow old and to be all alone as she remembered the angel of death calling for so many of her friends. Unable to bear thinking of all her problems and reflecting on her loneliness, she went to the phone and dialed a friend's number.

"Hello," came Jean's cheery voice.

Sarah said, "I just wanted to hear someone say I love you," and she hung up before Jean could answer.

Jean called right back. "Sarah, I love you, and you know God loves you, too. Tell me what's wrong."

Then Sarah began. "Well, it all started with the technician who checked my furnace. He said it will cost about two thousand dollars to fix. Then the plumber came, and he informed me that it will be a thousand more to fix a rusted-out pipe. That pipe will just have to stay rusted. The final straw was when I got a letter today from my doctor that said the report I had on my test is suspicious, and I'll have to do it over next week. Even my poodle, Jumbo, has gone crazy, yipping nonstop at the repairmen. I can't hear God say that He loves me, but I do feel better to hear somebody say it."

"Well, Sarah, even though you may not hear God say out loud that He loves you, His love is all around you, and He will never stop loving you. I love you too, and I'm going to pray that God will help you with all your problems and that you will feel His special love for you."

The next day when Jean called Sarah to see how she was, Sarah told her she was feeling a little better. Jean said, "I'm coming to your house for a little visit with you."

When she arrived, Jean had a hug for Sarah and a shopping bag, which she handed to her. When Sarah opened the bag, she found containers of homemade vegetable soup, chicken salad, fruit salad, and a big pan of brownies. At the very bottom of the bag were little note cards in a box with a beautiful purple butterfly on the front. Jumbo danced all around, sure that company had come to see him.

As Sarah wiped away her tears of appreciation, she said, "How did you know what my favorite foods are and that I needed cards? Now I really do feel like somebody loves me. Maybe God does care about me after all."

That night before she went to sleep, Jean bowed her head in gratitude. "Thank You, dear Lord, for this wonderful blessing. I am so glad You allowed me to bring Your love to Sarah today."

With Your Family: Snapshot of Jesus

Using old magazines, help your kids make a portrait of Jesus. In the analogy of the sheep and goats, Jesus says that if you've done compassionate deeds to these people who have real needs, you've done those deeds for Him. Your portrayal of Jesus will be comprised of pictures of people in need.

You'll need poster board, a stack of old magazines, markers, scissors, and glue. Using Jesus' list—hungry, thirsty, lacking clothing, stranger, in prison, and sick—have your children clip pictures that feature these needs. Glue them onto a poster board. At the top of the board put the words, "If you've helped them, you've helped Me."

While you're working, talk to your kids about what Jesus said and about the kind of people who need help. Don't let working on the poster be the end of the project—make a plan to take some kind of action together.

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Small Group Bible Study

Evangelism, Holiness, and Social Action

Compassionate Christianity

Matthew 25:31–46

Into the Subject

Would a loving God really put people in hell? Forever?

Into the Word

1. John speaks of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Matthew shows Him as a judging Shepherd. How can you reconcile those two images of Christ?
2. On what basis are people going to be judged, according to this parable?
3. Those who are condemned in this story show surprise. Why didn't they expect to receive this treatment?
4. Translate this parable into modern terms. Who are the sheep and the goats? Why will some people be surprised at the judgment?
5. What accounts for the low level of urgency that many Christians have about providing for the poor or others in need?
6. How do you understand Jesus' statement that by caring for those in need we are rendering acts of kindness to Jesus himself? Is that to be taken literally?
7. Jesus mentions several categories of people who are in need of assistance. If this parable were told today, what groups of people do you think Jesus might have named?
8. Why should Christians be concerned about those in prison, since they are being punished for their own acts?
9. How well does your church do at responding to the needs of those in your community? What would make your group more effective at this?
10. What is your level of motivation for ministering to others? What might raise your level of urgency about this issue?

Into the World

What is the next action you will take toward meeting a human need in your family, church, or community?

Thru the Bible in a Year

Monday	July 27:	Nehemiah 8–10
Tuesday	July 28:	Nehemiah 11–13
Wednesday	July 29:	2 Thessalonians 1–3
Thursday	July 30:	Esther 1–4
Friday	July 31:	Esther 5–10
Saturday	August 1:	Job 1–4
Sunday	August 2:	Job 5–8

Nehemiah Esther Job

A Steaming Dish of Stir Fry

by Jinny Sherman

It happened more than forty years ago, but I still remember Rena Determan, because she brought us hope and encouragement in a steaming dish of stir fry. She stood on our doorstep one evening when I was eight and handed Mom a casserole. Before she left, she said to me, "Your friends at church are praying for you. We're glad your dad's better."

Many people helped feed our family after Dad was hit head-on by a drunk driver on the Santa Ana Freeway. Their generosity kept our spirits up while we waited to see how Dad would recover.

Two weeks later, Mom took us to see him. Once in the hospital's atrium, we spoke to Dad through an open window. He looked pale and surrounded by white: white sheets, white cast on his leg, white bandages on his ribs. His voice, usually a smooth, easy bass, crackled. I stood there speechless, afraid my strong daddy would never be the same.

Life dragged on, quiet and somber, so different from our usual activity with friends playing in our house and yard, and Mom baking oatmeal cookies while she sang show tunes.

It seemed strange not to have Dad come home every night, kiss Mom, and greet us kids. We

were less kind to each other without him presiding at the dinner table.

Then, one day an ambulance brought Daddy home. Curious neighborhood children gathered to watch the ambulance attendants carry him into the house. He looked better—his skin had more color, his voice sounded smooth. He still couldn't walk, but he was *home*.

I soon figured out having Dad home didn't mean life as usual. Mom had her hands full trying to nurse him as well as parent us five kids. She had dark smudges under her eyes, constant frown lines on her forehead, and didn't laugh much. We still didn't have friends over.

But one thing always brought a smile to our faces. Every night the doorbell rang, and we wondered who would be standing there and what kind of food they would be carrying. We kids tripped over each other as we scrambled to the door. Mrs. Haggerty brought clam chowder and chocolate cake. We helped Mrs. Collard carry macaroni and cheese, green salad, and chocolate chip cookies. Rena Determan brought my favorite—a steaming dish of stir fry. It didn't matter what people made. We always devoured the food, excited to try something new and thankful to have something to talk about.

Lying in bed one night I realized that the gift of food was like a miracle. When Daddy had his terrible accident, it seemed like our wonderful family life was smashed, just like his car. But then the doorbell started ringing every night. People showed up with hot food and kind words, and somehow—while Daddy healed, we healed too.

Now when I hear a baby's been born or someone's family member has been hospitalized or has died, I pray, *Lord, what is my part in encouraging them?* Sometimes I take food to the family, visit the sick person, or write a card and include an encouraging Scripture.

Whatever it is, I know from experience even the smallest act reminds people they are loved, and that's often all they need to carry on.

Light from the WORD

Matthew 25:31–46

Down Payment

"Come . . . take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world." (Matt. 25:34)

I've often thought about what it would be like to hear that a wealthy relative had left me a large inheritance. How would the news be delivered? How would I react to the news, and how would I handle suddenly becoming wealthy? Of course I don't have wealthy relatives who will be leaving a huge inheritance for me. But I did receive a check for four hundred dollars from my grandmother's estate. I struggled with the decision about what I should do with it. "What would honor her?" I asked myself. We decided to buy an oak tree to replace one that had died. My grandmother loved trees, and I believed she would have been honored by the decision.

How much time and thought do you and I put into our response to the inheritance we've been given in Christ? The Scriptures tell us we are joint heirs with Jesus, and that all the good we enjoy is simply a down payment on the fullness of that gift which we will receive in heaven. We are to use that down payment, that inheritance check, on those things that please the Lord. God expects us to serve others with our gifts. And when we get to heaven, He will know who we are by how we've honored Him with the gifts we've been given.

—Cheri Cowell

To subscribe to *Light from the Word*, call 1-800-493-7539.

Laugh a Little

Work Is a Four-Letter Word

by Sandy Van Orden

I started a job this year. I've been home the past seven years being *Mom*, code for laundress, chef, and maid. I have loved every minute of it.

As of last fall, both my children are in school. And these are hard economic times.

What was I thinking?

Now, at the first chirp of my morning alarm, I roll over, wipe the sleep from my eyes, and begin to pray, with reverence and respect: *Lord, what have I done? Get me out of this mess! No more jobs!*

With all the belly-aching, you'd think I was part of a prison chain gang.

Almost. I'm a teacher's assistant. For first graders. Wiggly, giggly, squirmy, greasy, snotty first graders. They're cute, but there are a lot of them.

During rare quiet times, I ask the Lord to teach me a lesson about work. To soften my heart about work. And to get me fired. But for some inexplicable reason, these people at this school like me. Rats!

The Lord talks about work in Scripture. And not just about taking a rest from it! God believes in work. He gave Adam a job right away. Genesis 2:15 says, "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it."

He reminds us through Paul to work like Christ himself is our boss. Ephesians 6:7 says, "Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men."

We reflect our passion for Jesus through our work. Our optimistic attitude on the job reflects His hopeful spirit. Our genuine smile to our coworkers is a gateway to His open arms. Our self-discipline in work mirrors His order and peace. Our willingness to learn and grow through each circumstance reflects His desire to forgive and redeem.

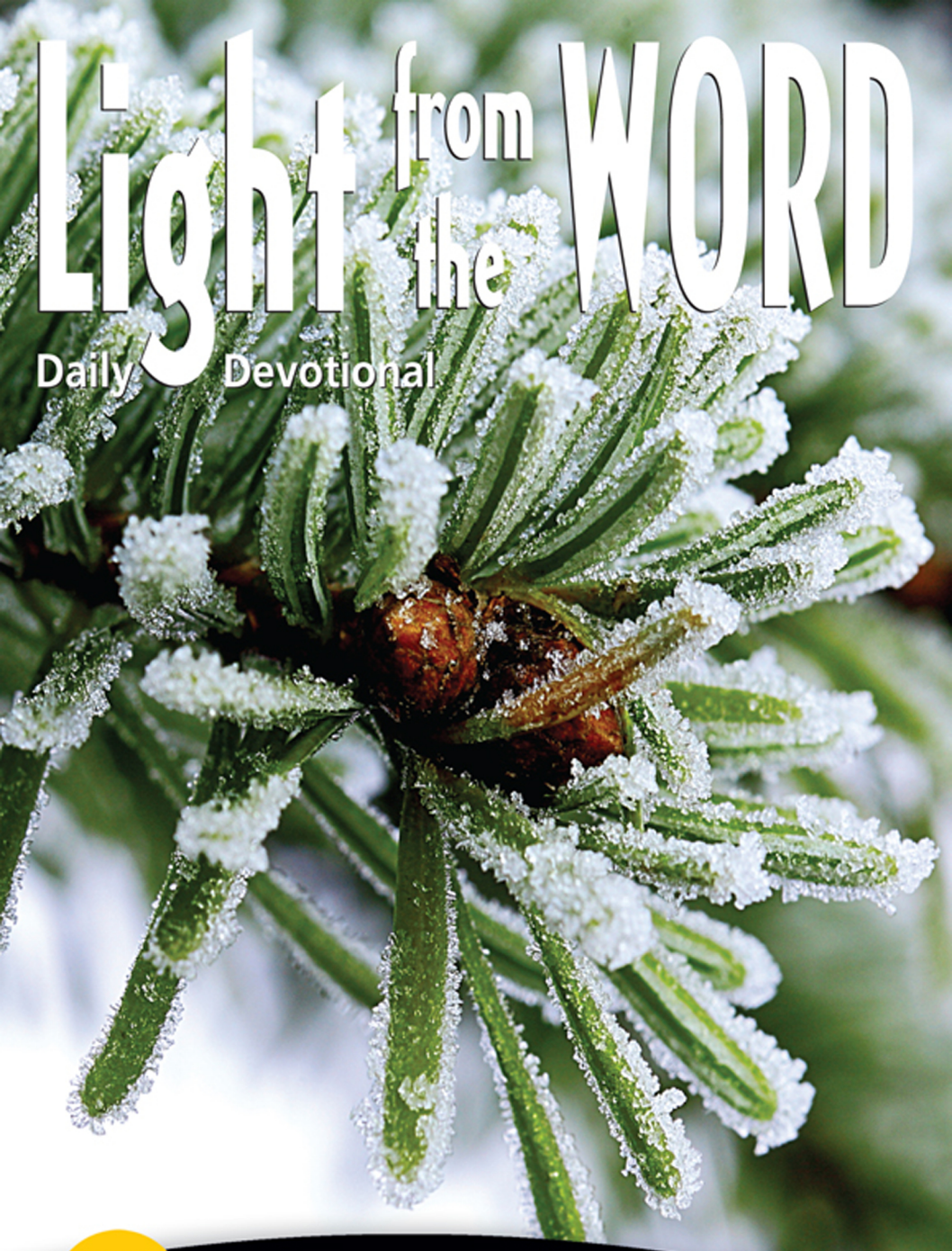
Work really is a four-letter word. It is a G-I-F-T.

Fascinating Fact

John Wesley wrote that "holiness is social." And so the founder of Methodism put his preaching into practice by working against slavery, miscarriages of justice in the court systems, corrupt election practices, and government policies that adversely affected the nation, as well as advocating for the poor, the unemployed, the debtors, the sick, the imprisoned, the uneducated, the widows, and the orphans.

Light from the WORD

Daily Devotional



WESLEY BIBLE RESOURCES

RELEVANT INSPIRED PRACTICAL LIFE-CHANGING

December 2012—February 2013

Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way." (Isa. 30:21)

GOD'S GPS

MY HUSBAND AND I recently purchased a car with a GPS (Global Positioning System). It includes a little screen with a map and a bossy woman who tells us exactly what to do. She and I have a somewhat challenging relationship. I try to comply, but the words she most often speaks are still "Make a u-turn if possible." If I could have designed the system, she would say, "I know you've had a hard day. Why don't you pull over and get a mocha?"

Fortunately, I do have another GPS in my life. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit as our guide and said, "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come" (John 16:13).

There are some important differences between the Holy Spirit and an ordinary GPS. First, the Holy Spirit knows and loves us. Second, He is connected to the ultimate source of truth. And finally, the Holy Spirit is living and active. He is able to creatively respond to whatever circumstances we may face.

A GPS may help us get through traffic, but the Holy Spirit will help us get through life. All we have to do is listen and obey.

—Holley Gerth

Drive a different route today and reflect on how God wants to guide you.

SAFE ON ALL SIDES

WHENEVER THE PRESIDENT of the United States goes out in public, he is surrounded by Secret Service agents. These highly trained agents take an oath to protect the President at any cost, even if that means they give their lives to save his. They usually try to blend in with the crowd and not draw attention to themselves, but they constantly scan the crowd and the surrounding area, looking for any sign that the President may be in danger. At the slightest sign of trouble, they quickly move to guard him and remove the potential problem. Even though they stay in the background, they form a wall of security that allows the President to move about freely.

When Satan approached God about testing Job, he noted that God had built a hedge of protection around Job. God also was present in the fiery furnace with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to keep them from harm. David called God his strong tower and his refuge. All of these men knew God's amazing power, strength, and protection would never fail them.

Are you feeling weak? Defenseless? Vulnerable to the Enemy? God will not leave us to fight our battles alone. He may seem to linger in the background, but He is ever vigilant when watching over His children, and His help is always right on time.

—Jeff Friend

Guard my life and rescue me; let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.

(Ps. 25:20)

Meditate on a time God rescued you in response to your call.

NEW HEART, NEW SPIRIT, NEW LIFE

THIS MARRIAGE IS IRRETRIEVABLY BROKEN. The magistrate's words devastated my heart. I left the courtroom in tears, drove home sobbing, and sat in my living room and wailed. I couldn't believe I was truly divorced.

Though the county court had declared my marriage dead, the heavenly court had planned a different verdict.

Over the next few years, God worked relentlessly in my heart and in the heart of my ex-husband. He showed us our sin—the disrespect and disregard we had demonstrated to each other—and He showed us His grace and love. Then one day He did something amazing. He gave us back to each other—not to pick up where we'd left off four years earlier. Not to patch up our old marriage. No, He gave us new, soft hearts, new spirits of love, and a completely new relationship. We both realized what we had in each other, and we began to evaluate misunderstanding and miscommunication in light of this new thing God had created: Was being right worth risking this precious relationship? Never!

Your situation may or may not be as dramatic as mine, but whatever your situation, God can give you a new heart and a new spirit. As a result, you'll begin to see life from a new perspective—His—and what you receive will far surpass whatever you may have lost. I'm living proof!

—Mary McNeil

Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed and get a new heart and a new spirit. (Ezek. 18:31)

Ask God to show you His perspective on a difficult circumstance or relationship.