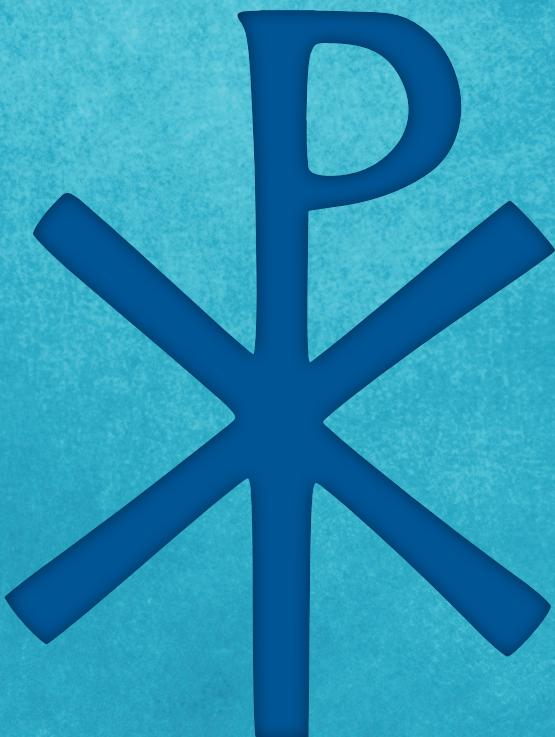


THE LORD'S MERCY
ENDURES FOREVER:

40 DAILY DEVOTIONS
OF GOD'S COMFORT



APOSTLE'S CREED

I BELIEVE IN GOD THE FATHER ALMIGHTY, MAKER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH.

And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead , and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost; one holy Christian Church, the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy Name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
and the glory,
forever and ever. Amen.

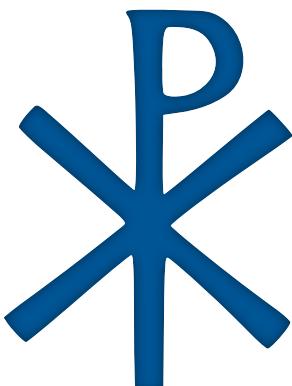
MARTIN LUTHER'S EVENING PRAYER

I thank Thee, my Heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Thy dear Son, that Thou hast graciously kept me this day, and I pray Thee to forgive me all my sins, where I have done wrong, and graciously keep me this night. For into Thy hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Thy holy angel be with me, that the Wicked Foe may have no power over me. Amen.

MARTIN LUTHER'S MORNING PRAYER

I thank Thee, my Heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Thy dear Son, that Thou hast kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray Thee to keep me this day also from sin and all evil, that all my doings and life may please Thee. For into Thy hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Thy holy angel be with me, that the Wicked Foe may have no power over me. Amen.

THE LORD'S MERCY
ENDURES FOREVER:



40 DAILY DEVOTIONS
OF GOD'S COMFORT

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

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INTRODUCTION

Jesus said, “*In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world*” (JOHN 16:33).

Even as little children, we learn that life isn’t fair. Every day, we face the consequences of sin and brokenness in our lives, from illnesses to disasters to other tragedies. These events often leave us struggling financially, physically and spiritually.

But no matter what comes our way, we have the assurance that the victory has already been won for us. Jesus paid the ultimate price on the cross so that we might be with Him in heaven for all eternity.

Thanks to the generous members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), we are able to provide this devotional book free of charge. These 40 devotions — which each include a Scripture passage, a meditation, a prayer and a hymn — are focused on bringing God’s comfort and peace to those who are struggling after a disaster or other crisis.

Although this resource is distinctly Christian, it is intended for anyone who is suffering from the brokenness of this world.

I pray that through it, you will be reminded that God loves and cares about you, even when it is hard to understand what is going on around you. “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope” (ROM. 15:13).

Rev. Dr. Ross Edward Johnson
DIRECTOR, LCMS DISASTER RESPONSE

DEVOTION 1

THE SHAPE OF PRAISE

"I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart;
before the gods I sing your praise;
I bow down toward your holy temple
and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and
your faithfulness,
for you have exalted above all things
your name and your word.
On the day I called, you answered me;
my strength of soul you increased ...
Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve my life;
you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies,
and your right hand delivers me.
The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me;
your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever.
Do not forsake the work of your hands" (Ps.138:1-3, 7-8).

T IS EASY TO GIVE THANKS to God when prayers are answered as we hoped. A surgery is successful, a loved one recovers, a river in flood recedes and in response we readily and whole-heartedly join the psalmist in praise of God's exalted name and Word. We pray, the Lord answers and our strength of soul is increased. Hope soars and faith is made strong. We give thanks and sing praise for answered prayers.

But what if our prayers are not answered as we hoped? We beg and plead and God does not give us the longed-for answer. A loved one dies, an illness continues, a storm does not change course and spare our property. Where is God? Is He listening as He promised? How can we praise God when He seems to be silent? At such times our praise continues, but it takes a different shape. Our praise does not ring with songs and rejoicing but is formed instead into obedient submission to God's will and purpose. Our praise takes shape as humble trust.

On the night our Lord Jesus was betrayed, He spent time in prayer to His Father. Jesus prayed that He might not have to drink the cup of suffering that awaited Him, the cup of God's wrath against human sin, including ours. Yet Jesus also prayed that His Father's will would be accomplished, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done" (LUKE 22:42). Even strengthened by an angel, the Savior continued to pray in anguish so great that His sweat "became like great drops of blood falling to the ground" (LUKE 22:44). The cup was not removed. Jesus was arrested, tried and condemned to death. The innocent Son of God was nailed to the cross. For us He drained the terrible cup of suffering and wrath.

Shortly before His death, Jesus had prayed, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you" (JOHN 17:1). The Son desired the Father's glory and Jesus' praise for His heavenly Father took shape as submission to His Father's will;

He became "obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (PHIL. 2:8). On the cross He fulfilled His Father's purpose — our salvation. Jesus stood in our place and suffered the penalty we deserved for our sins.

In His death and resurrection, our sins are swept away. Adopted through Baptism as God's beloved sons and daughters, nourished by our Lord's holy Supper, we receive strength to glorify our heavenly Father in all circumstances. When our prayers are answered as we hoped, we shout for joy and sing His praise, but when the answers are not as we asked, our praise will reflect the glory that Jesus brought to His Father through the cross. In humble trust, we place ourselves into our Father's hands, "The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands."

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, you have commanded us to pray and have promised to hear our prayers. When our prayers are answered as we hope, accept our joyful praise and thanks. When, according to Your gracious will, You answer in ways we did not seek, lead us by Your Spirit to conform our hearts and minds to the life of our Savior so that our praise takes the shape of humble trust. For Jesus' sake, forgive our sins and fulfill Your purpose in our lives. Your steadfast love endures forever. Amen.

HYMN

When with sorrow I am stricken,
Hope anew by heart will quicken;
All my longing shall be stilled.
To His loving kindness tender
Soul and body I surrender,
For on God alone I build.

Well He knows what best to grant me;
All the longing hopes that haunt me,
Joy and sorrow, have their day.
I shall doubt His wisdom never;
As God wills, so be it ever;
I commit to Him my way.

("All Depends on Our Possessing," LSB 732, vs. 4-5)
Text and Music: Public domain

DEVOTION 2

CROSS TRAINING

“Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, ‘I believed, and so I spoke,’ we also believe, and so we also speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (2 COR. 4:13-18).

IN INSPIRED UNDERSTATEMENT, the apostle Paul refers to the trouble and grief we endure as “this light momentary affliction.” Light? Momentary? The things we experience do not feel light. We are burdened by the difficulties of daily life, not to mention the extraordinary pain endured during times of crisis. We carry the weight of the world on our shoulders and it is all far from momentary. The pain and hardship may last for months or years or a lifetime.

Surely Paul knew better. The apostle was no stranger to suffering. The steadfast missionary for Christ was often persecuted for his faith, arrested, beaten and imprisoned. He suffered an unidentified physical affliction, his “thorn in the flesh” (2 COR. 12:7). Yet God revealed to His apostle the truth of the matter. The affliction we now endure, whatever its source and duration, has a purpose. Our suffering is weight training, “For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.” Awaiting us in eternity is an immense burden of glory and joy that far outweighs the troubles we now face. As athletes lift weights to prepare their bodies for competition (and they hope, for the glory of victory!), so we, too, are in training. We are preparing to take on the certain glory of a victory that is already won.

Our Lord Jesus suffered more than “a light momentary affliction.” He did not bear on His shoulders the weight of the world, but the awful weight of the world’s sin. He shouldered His cross and carried its heavy, wooden weight along the road to Golgotha. There He “bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 PETER 2:24). His affliction, his cross, was the necessary step to glory. Jesus, “for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (HEB. 12:2). Following our Lord we too endure, for the joy set before us, the crosses we must now bear. The burden surely wears us down, and the apostle takes note of this, “Our outer self is wasting away.” Yet even as we are wearing down, we are being built up. By the power of the Holy Spirit at work in Word and Sacrament, “our inner self is being renewed day by day” as we are conformed to the life of our Savior.

The things that are seen, the troubles we endure, are transient and quickly pass away. They are momentary when compared with eternity. What is unseen, the glory that awaits, is eternal. God raised Jesus from the dead, and on the Last Day He will raise us up from our graves. For all eternity we will bear the weight of glory won for us by our Lord’s death and resurrection. We’re in training now, and we’ll be ready.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, forgive us when we turn from You and rebel against Your Word and will. Have mercy on us for the sake of Jesus our Savior, who lifted the weight of sin and guilt from us and carried that terrible burden in His own body to the cross. When our attention becomes fixed only on the troubles we see before us, turn our hearts to the glory that is unseen, the glory won for us through Jesus’ death and resurrection. Comfort us now in our afflictions, and train us by your Spirit to bear the weight of eternal glory that will be ours through faith in Jesus’ name. Amen.

HYMN

“Come, follow Me,” the Savior spake,
“All in My way abiding;
Deny yourselves, the world forsake,
Obey My call and guiding.
O bear the cross, whate'er betide,
Take My example for your guide.”

Then let us follow Christ, our Lord,
And take the cross appointed
And, firmly clinging to His Word,
In suff'ring be undaunted.
For those who bear the battle's strain
The crown of heav'nly life obtain.

(“Come, Follow Me,” the Savior Spake,” LSB 688, vs. 1, 5)
Text and Music: Public domain

DEVOTION 3

IF YOU HAD BEEN HERE

"Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world'" ([JOHN 11:21-27](#)).

THE TWO SISTERS SENT A MESSAGE, "He whom you love is ill." Jesus' friend Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, was seriously ill. Upon hearing the news, Jesus replied that this illness was for the glory of God and for the glory of His Son. Yet with glory awaiting Him, the Son of God, who had healed so many and even raised the dead, did not rush to Lazarus' side. For two days Jesus stayed where He was and, while He delayed, Lazarus died. When Jesus finally arrived, Lazarus' sister Martha greeted the Savior with the sad observation, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

If You had been here. Perhaps in prayer you have said much the same. "Lord, if You had been here this tragedy would not have happened." "If You had been here, Lord, things would have worked out differently. The miracle of Your presence would have changed everything." That was what Martha hoped and expected and, like her, we have our own hopes and expectations. Jesus had another purpose. The unfolding events concerning Lazarus would glorify God and His almighty Son. It was a divine purpose that moved toward fulfillment as Jesus delayed and Lazarus' terminal illness progressed to its sad end.

Martha's sorrowful greeting was followed by her statement of faith, "But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." Jesus promised a resurrection and Martha agreed; her brother would rise again on the Last Day. The hope and promise of that resurrection stood before her in the flesh. "I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus said, "Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" Martha believed, and soon others would, too. The stone sealing the tomb was rolled away and, at Jesus' command, Lazarus emerged alive and well from his grave.

If You had been here. Martha's greeting reflects our hopes and plans. In prayer we come to the Lord with our requests, as Martha did, but we never need to say, "If You had been here." Our Savior is always with us as He promised ([MATT. 28:20](#)). Yet, as with Lazarus, He may have a different, greater purpose for us. We do not need to know, we cannot know, the precise purpose of God in a particular situation, but we can be certain that Jesus gives more

than we ask. We seek quick cures and improved health, and while we may receive these, Jesus will do more.

He will wipe away our tears and shelter us in His presence for all eternity. We ask for a delay of death. We may receive that gift, but through His redeeming death and resurrection, Jesus overcame death, and His victory is ours. Through faith in Jesus' name, we too will be raised from death to eternal life. The promise He made to Martha is His promise for us, "Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, teach us to pray as Martha did, with confidence in your love and power and in the certain hope of the resurrection. When answers are delayed or not as we hoped, strengthen our faith according to Your Word and help us to trust in Your good and gracious will. In You alone, Lord, we have the sure and certain promise of life and resurrection. Amen.

HYMN

I know that my Redeemer lives;
What comfort this sweet sentence gives!
He lives, He lives, who once was dead;
He lives, my ever-living head.

He lives to silence all my fears;
He lives to wipe away my tears;
He lives to calm my troubled heart;
He lives all blessings to impart.

("I Know that My Redeemer Lives," *LSB* 461, vs. 1, 5)
Text and Music: Public domain

DEVOTION 4

HEAVENLY PEACE

"Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness!
You have given me relief when I was in distress.
Be gracious to me and hear my prayer!"

There are many who say, 'Who will show us some good?
Lift up the light of your face upon us, O LORD!'
You have put more joy in my heart
than they have when their grain and wine abound.
In peace I will both lie down and sleep;
for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety" (Ps. 4:1, 6-8).

THE BELOVED CHRISTMAS HYMN, "Silent Night," could be a lullaby for our infant Savior, "Sleep in heavenly peace." We like to imagine that silent and holy night with the virgin mother and Joseph watching over the sleeping Child as astounded shepherds marvel at the sight. Through His grace, His favor for undeserving sinners, God would in this holy Child reconcile the world to Himself. The silent and holy night witnessed the truth of the angels' praise, "On earth peace among those with whom he is pleased" (LUKE 2:14).

We would like to enjoy a silent night now and then, a night to sleep in heavenly peace. But such nights of quiet rest do not always come to us. Heaven's peace is replaced by sleepless nights and earthbound worry, pain or fear. Tragedy and loss can turn quiet nights into long, dark and lonely hours.

The Child of Bethlehem knows our long, dark hours. He has lived through them. Tragedy and fear soon shattered His quiet nights. Wise men came to Jerusalem seeking a new king, unwelcome news for the jealous King Herod. His plans frustrated by a warning dream for the wise men, Herod sent soldiers to kill the youngest boys in Bethlehem in an effort to destroy the holy Child. The silent nights of that little town became for many the nights we know, nights of sorrow, loss and weeping. Warned by an angel, Joseph took the Child and Mary and fled to safety in Egypt. It was not yet time for the Son of God to die.

But His hour would come. The reign of the Prince of Peace began on that silent and holy night, but His peaceful kingdom would be secured only "by the blood of his cross" (COL. 1:20). In His earthly ministry, our Savior endured sleepless nights. He who once slept in a manger had "nowhere to lay his head" (MATT. 8:20). He spent nights in prayer to His heavenly Father (LUKE 6:12). When His hour came, He was crucified for the sins of the world, for our sins. In a sealed and guarded tomb He slept the sleep of death. Then, on the third day, He awoke from death, never to die again.

The psalmist pleads, "Lift up the light of your face upon us, O LORD!" The light that streams from the manger, the cross and the empty tomb is the light of God's grace. It is light that brings peace to our restless nights. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, we have forgiveness for our sins and peace with God — heavenly

peace. We have His promise, "He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep" (PS. 121:14). Our Savior, who once slept in the manger, who was crucified and raised to give us forgiveness and peace with God, does not sleep. Through restless nights and long dark hours, the Prince of Peace keeps watch over us, "In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O LORD, make me to dwell in safety."

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, Prince of Peace, reign in my heart with the peace that only you can give. Fill my heart with the joy and confidence of knowing that you are watching over me day and night. When I cannot sleep, turn my thoughts toward prayer and the promises of Your Word. Bring to my restless thoughts the certainty of Your love and mercy. When I do sleep, grant to me quiet, healing rest. Keep me safe in your care so that I might sleep in heavenly peace. Amen.

HYMN

Silent night, holy night!
All is calm, all is bright
Round yon virgin mother and child.
Holy infant, so tender and mild,
 Sleep in heavenly peace,
 Sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night, holy night!
Son of God, love's pure light
Radiant beams from Thy holy face
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
 Jesus, Lord at Thy birth,
 Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth.

("Silent Night," LSB 363, vs. 1, 3)
Text and Music: Public domain

DEVOTION 5

FACING DISASTER

“When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem” (**LUKE 9:51-53**).

THERE ARE DISASTERS FROM WHICH WE MUST RUN, if we are able to do so. Storms, floods, criminal activity; there are situations in which we must try to reach safety. Yet even events that can be escaped may leave behind inescapable damage to property and lives, and some circumstances cannot be escaped at all. You are left to face the ongoing disaster or its aftermath. You would like to run away, to be anywhere but where you are. But try as you might, you cannot get away. Wherever you go, grief or doubt or anxiety follow.

Jesus knew the disaster that lay ahead for Him. He repeatedly warned His disciples of the events to come, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (**LUKE 9:22**). He would be “delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (**ACTS 2:23**). Jesus knew that the road before Him led to rejection, betrayal, arrest and a terrible death. His little flock of followers would scatter when their Shepherd was struck down. Jesus knew what was coming and He did not turn from it. He set His face to go to Jerusalem. Since Jews and Samaritans had no dealings with each other (**JOHN 4:9**), a Samaritan village refused to receive Jesus simply because He was on His way to Jerusalem. The rejection of the Son of Man continues as He approaches the cross.

As the hour of His death drew near, Jesus said, “And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ But for this purpose I have come to this hour” (**JOHN 12:27**). This was the reason He had come. Jesus was obedient to His Father’s will, “Obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (**PHIL. 2:8**). Rejected as Israel’s Messiah, forsaken by His followers and abandoned to the suffering and death of the cross, Jesus entrusted Himself to His heavenly Father. Dying, the Savior prayed in words that bring to mind a child’s bedtime prayer, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (**LUKE 23:46**). With confident trust in His heavenly Father, Jesus faced the disaster awaiting Him, and through His obedient death and His triumphant resurrection, He overcame it all for us.

For us Jesus faced the awful disaster that was the wrath of God against human sin so that we will never have to face the ultimate disaster of eternal separation from God. Jesus walked headlong into disaster, so that whatever tragedies and sorrow we may face, we will never do so apart from His saving, healing presence. As the psalmist writes, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me” (**PS. 23:4**).

Through storm and grief and shadowed valleys, Jesus has set His face to walk with you.

PRAYER

Lord and Savior, You set Your face to go to Jerusalem, knowing that there You would suffer betrayal and crucifixion. You took onto Yourself the punishment that I deserved for my sin, on the third day You rose up from death to win eternal life. When I am surrounded by disaster and fearful circumstances, help me to look to the promises found in your Word. Teach me to turn to You in prayer, confident that You will walk with me through any trouble that comes my way. Amen.

HYMN

O perfect life of love!
All, all, is finished now,
All that He left His throne above
To do for us below.

No work is left undone
Of all the Father willed;
His toil, His sorrows, one by one,
The Scriptures have fulfilled.

No pain that we can share
But He has felt its smart;
All forms of human grief and care
Have pierced that tender heart.

(“O Perfect Life of Love,” *LSB 452, vs. 1-3*)
Text and Music: Public domain

DEVOTION 6

WHY?

"There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish'" (LUKE 13:1-5).

MOVED BY SURVIVOR'S GUILT OR SIMPLY BY HUMAN LOSS, in the face of tragedy and disaster we ask, "Why?" Why did those people die? Did they do something to deserve what happened to them? Why was that town, that house, destroyed, when others nearby were spared? Some of the people listening to Jesus may have had questions just like these. Jews from Galilee had gone to the temple in Jerusalem to worship. At the order of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, perhaps in response to a riot or rumors of rebellion, soldiers attacked the Galileans, mingling the blood of the pilgrims with the blood of animals intended for sacrifice. In another tragedy, a tower in the Siloam neighborhood of Jerusalem collapsed and killed 18 people. Upon hearing these reports, Jesus posed the question even before his listeners could ask what was surely on their minds, just as it would have been on ours. Why? Were those Galilean pilgrims worse sinners than everyone else in Galilee? Were the people killed in the tower collapse worse offenders than all of the other people in Jerusalem? Why did *they* die?

Jesus poses the questions and provides an answer, although He does not offer the precise answers that we might hope to hear. Were the people who died worse sinners than those who survived? "No," Jesus answers. He offers no other reason or purpose for the deaths, but instead immediately turns our attention from the earthly disasters to the possibility of a terrifying, eternal tragedy, "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

In frightening situations, in circumstances of illness and tragedy, we want to know why. Often the question is personal, "Why me?" The answers to such questions are hidden within the purposes and majesty of God and are not for us to know. Jesus, in this account, provides the answer we *need* to know. He warns of the possibility of perishing eternally, of suffering and separation from God forever; a tragedy without end and in which there is no hope. Yet with the terrifying warning, Jesus tells us to repent, and beneath His call to repentance lies the solid foundation of the Gospel promise of forgiveness.

The blood of the Galileans mingled with the blood of their sacrifices. The blood of Jesus, the perfect Lamb of sacrifice,

flowed from the cross to wash away our sins. The tower in Siloam collapsed and killed 18 people. For our salvation Jesus was crushed beneath the weight of human sin and guilt. We have no reason for the death of the Galileans or the people in Siloam, but we know the reason for the death of God's Son. He suffered and died to pay the penalty we deserved for our sins. He rose to overcome death itself so that we will live in His presence forever. That may bring to mind another question, "Why me?" We know that answer, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (JOHN 3:16).

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, we have so many questions. We want to know why things happen as they do. We want reasons and answers for the senseless tragedies we witness. Even though those answers are not revealed to us, lead us to repent of our sins. Forgive us and fill us with hope and confident trust in Your promises. Lead us to respond with compassion for those who are suffering so that they will witness Your love through our words and actions. Amen.

HYMN

God loved the world so that He gave
His only Son the lost to save,
That all who would in Him believe
Should everlasting life receive.

Christ Jesus is the ground of faith,
Who was made flesh and suffered death;
All then who trust in Him alone
Are built on this chief cornerstone.

("God Loved the World So That He Gave," LSB 571, vs. 1-2)
Text and Music: Public domain

DEVOTION 7

RAVENS AND LILIES

“And he said to his disciples, ‘Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you. Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also’” (LUKE 12:22-34).

T MAY BE ONE OF JESUS’ MOST DIFFICULT COMMANDS,
“Do not be anxious.” Anxious thoughts sweep in quickly and can, without warning, overwhelm us, from the smallest twinge of nerves to gripping, hard-to-breathe anxiety. Food, clothing, shelter, work, school, family relationships, friendships; we can, and often do, worry about everything. Yet our Lord and Savior says, “Do not be anxious about your life.” Jesus does not give us this difficult command and then walk away, leaving us to figure things out on our own. He leads us to replace our worried thoughts with something better.

How will we pay for food or rent? How will we buy clothing and shoes? Jesus knows we ask such questions, but He turns our attention instead to the birds and flowers. Ravens do not grow and harvest crops (or buy groceries), yet our heavenly Father feeds them all. Lilies do not weave cloth and sew clothing (or shop in department stores), yet God dresses them in colors more brilliant than the rich, royal robes of King Solomon. If the heavenly Father provides for ravens and lilies, how much more will He care for you! You are not alone in your concerns over food, clothing and every other worry that demands your attention, “all the nations of the world seek after these things.” Believers and unbelievers alike have these same needs and worry about them, but the Father who created us all knows our needs.

Jesus does much more than advise us to remember birds and flowers. What *should* occupy our minds? Seek the kingdom

of God, Jesus says, His reign in our hearts and lives; and we do not have to worry about that. It is our Father’s pleasure give us the kingdom, “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (COL. 1:13-14). God delivered us from the “domain of darkness.” Through the death and resurrection of His Son, He shattered the reign of sin, death and Satan that held us captive. We are transferred by His grace through faith into Christ’s kingdom. As ravens feed on what they did not plant or harvest, we are nourished by the gift of Jesus’ body and blood in His Holy Supper. As lilies are dressed in bright clothing they did not sew, we are dressed by faith in the righteousness of Christ Jesus. We have treasure that no anxiety or earthly tragedy can take from us, the treasure of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life in our Savior’s presence. Set aside your fears for a moment and think about that!

We are to share our earthly and eternal treasure with those in need (they have worries too) and, when anxiety threatens, follow Jesus’ command. Think about well-fed ravens and brightly dressed lilies. It isn’t idle daydreaming. Think about your heavenly Father, who knows your needs better than you do. Think about the kingdom that is yours.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, when I am trapped in anxiety and fears for the future, comfort me and strengthen my faith through the hope and peace found in Your Holy Word. Turn my attention to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, where I see evidence of Your care for all of creation. Through Christ my Savior You have delivered me from sin and death and have brought me safely into His eternal kingdom. You know my needs and you will provide for me, now and for eternity. Hear my prayer in Jesus’ name. Amen.

HYMN

I am trusting Thee, Lord Jesus,
Trusting only Thee;
Trusting Thee for full salvation,
Great and free.

I am trusting Thee for cleansing
In the crimson flood;
Trusting Thee to make me holy
By Thy blood.

I am trusting Thee to guide me;
Thou alone shalt lead,
Ev’ry day and hour supplying
All my need.

I am trusting Thee, Lord Jesus;
Never let me fall.
I am trusting Thee forever
And for all.

(“I Am Trusting Thee, Lord Jesus,” LSB 729, vs. 1, 3, 4, 6)
Text and Music: Public domain

DEVOTION 8

LOOK UP

"And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (**LUKE 21:25-28**).

THE NEWS REPORTS ARE FRIGHTENING. Terror attacks, mass shootings, storms and wild fires; troubling events are taking place on the other side of the world or striking close to home. Those same events are far more terrifying, and perhaps deadly, for those who must endure them. Whether near or far, the world is in an uproar or, as Jesus said, there is distress of nations and people are fainting with fear. We would like to hide until it's over, but it will never be over — or so it appears. We are living in the last times, the unknown length of days between our Lord's earthly ministry and His visible return on the Last Day. For centuries Christians have watched the unfolding tragedies in these last days and rightly recognized them as the beginning of the end. Jesus told us to watch for such events and remember "that he is near, at the very gates" (**MARK 13:29**). Although false prophets try in vain to predict the date, we do not know, we cannot know, the day of His return. But we can be sure of His promise. Our Lord is coming again.

The events that frighten us signal "the beginning of the end" for, as the apostle Paul writes, "the present form of this world is passing away" (**1 COR. 7:31**). But for all who trust in Christ Jesus for salvation, such things signal not only the beginning of the end, but the beginning of the beginning — a new beginning. Jesus said that the wars, earthquakes and famines we witness "are but the beginning of the birth pains" (**MATT. 24:8**). The apostle Paul explains the anticipated new birth, "For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (**ROM. 8:22-23**). In the water and the Word of Baptism, the Holy Spirit created us anew in Christ Jesus. We have the first fruits of the Spirit, the guarantee of resurrection life to come. When Jesus returns at the final harvest we will be raised bodily from death, as He was, and clothed in immortality.

On that great day God will create "a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (**2 PETER 3:13**). We will live in His presence forever, praising our risen and glorified Savior for the salvation won for us on the cross. God will wipe away our tears and "neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, and death will be no more," for the former things will have passed away (**REV. 21:4**). When you hear and see the violence and

destruction as our world groans in its birth pains, don't hide from the news. Look up! "Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (**LUKE 21:28**).

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, when we are frightened at the things we see happening all around us, turn our eyes and hearts to the promises of Your Holy Word. You have created us anew in the water and Word of Baptism. Help us to live as Your redeemed people, in lives of love, service and witness. Fill us with compassion for those who are suffering, especially those who are persecuted for their trust in You, Savior, we long for the day of your return. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

HYMN

The day is surely drawing near
When Jesus, God's anointed,
In all His power shall appear
As judge whom God appointed.
Then fright shall banish idle mirth,
And flames on flames shall ravage earth
As Scripture long has warned us.

O Jesus Christ, do not delay,
But hasten our salvation;
We often tremble on our way
In fear and tribulation
O hear and grant our fervent plea:
Come, mighty judge, and set us free
From death and ev'ry evil.

("The Day is Surely Drawing Near," *LSB 508*, vs. 1, 7)
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DEVOTION 9

I, EVEN I ONLY

“There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said to him, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’ He said, ‘I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.’ And he said, ‘Go out and stand on the mount before the LORD.’ And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper ... And the LORD said to him ... ‘Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him’” (1 KINGS 19:9-12, 15, 18).

WHEN EVERYTHING IS LOST, or nearly so — home, family members, friends, community — all that may remain is an awful, crushing loneliness. Where will we turn? Who will listen and understand?

The Old Testament prophet Elijah found himself in that lonely place, “I, even I only, am left.” In zealous defense of the God of Israel, Elijah killed the pagan priests of a false god. In return, the equally pagan Queen Jezebel, who had already murdered Elijah’s fellow prophets, promised to kill Elijah as well. Elijah ran for his life and finally, huddled alone in a cave, he mourned, “I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.”

God heard Elijah’s sad complaint and drew the prophet out of himself and out of his cave. Elijah was summoned outside as the Lord passed by. A wind tore at the mountainside, but the Lord was not in the wind. An earthquake shook the ground, but the Lord was not in the earthquake or in the firestorm that followed. Finally, God spoke into Elijah’s burned and shattered world with a low whisper. With His whispered Word, the God of Israel sent Elijah back into service, assuring the lonely prophet that he was not alone — the Lord would preserve His people.

Elijah’s reaction is very much like our own. Understandably, in difficult times, and even in ordinary circumstances, we turn inward on ourselves. It is our sinful nature to do so and to mourn along with the frightened prophet, “I, I only.” Enduring wind and earthquake and fire, we may even fear the disasters as signs of God’s wrath against us. God surely governs the storms we face, but He speaks to us, not in disaster, but in the quiet whisper of His Word. His Word spoke to us in the whispering cry of the newborn Child of Bethlehem. His Word spoke to us in the gasping whisper of our dying Savior on the cross. His Word speaks to us in Holy Scripture, in the comforting words of fellow believers, in the Gospel Word proclaimed from the pulpit and in the quiet whisper of His Holy Supper, “Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins.”

Storms of death and destruction could not destroy God’s people. He kept them for Himself. With the mighty whisper of His Word, God summoned Elijah out of hiding and sent him back into the world to carry out His work. No storms of death and destruction can separate us from God’s loving care. By the power of His Holy Spirit (who descended in wind and fire on Pentecost), God shields us and keeps us for Himself. He summons us from our sinful, self-centered cry, “I, I only,” and sends us out in love and service. God alone can say, “I, I only,” and His mighty, whispered Word gives us His name, “I Am” (Ex. 3:14) and His eternal promise, “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (MATT. 28:20).

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, shelter me with Your love from the many storms that threaten my life. When I am turned inward on myself and lost in fear, call me out of hiding with Your quiet and mighty Word. Comfort me with the good news of forgiveness and life found only in Jesus, my Savior. Strengthen me by Your Word and Spirit and send me out to comfort and strengthen others with the whisper of Your Word. Hear my prayer in Jesus’ name. Amen.

HYMN

I pass through trials all the way,
With sin and ills contending;
In patience I must bear each day
The cross of God’s own sending.
When in adversity
I know not where to flee,
When storms of woe my soul dismay,
I pass through trials all the way.

I walk with Jesus all the way,
His guidance never fails me;
Within His wounds I find a stay
When Satan’s pow’r assails me;
And by His footsteps led,
My path I safely tread.
No evil leads my soul astray;
I walk with Jesus all the way.

(“I Walk in Danger All the Way,” LSB 716, vs. 2, 5)
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DEVOTION 10

GLORY

"And the LORD said to Moses, 'This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.' Moses said, 'Please show me your glory.' And he said, 'I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,' he said, 'you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.' And the LORD said, 'Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen'" (Ex. 33:17-23).

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE." We may find ourselves in that very place at any given time. We may be facing a difficult decision, trapped in indecision or perhaps we are simply in a place we do not wish to be.

"Between a rock and a hard place." That is where Moses found himself, and at his own request. Scripture tells us, "The LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex. 33:11). Moses spoke with the God of Israel in a way few had ever done, but he wanted something more. The prophet spoke with God face to face, but Moses also wanted to see the divine glory that he had not yet experienced. That glorious vision was not permitted. The Lord graciously refused Moses' request, "Man shall not see me and live." But the Lord did give to Moses what could safely be granted. He placed Moses in a cleft of the rock, perhaps, we might say, "between a rock and a hard place," and covered him until the blinding glory passed by. Moses was permitted only a safe, passing glimpse of God's glory.

In times of trial, when we find ourselves between a rock and a hard place, we long to see God's glory, just as Moses did. We want God to step in with dazzling might and power to save us and change the circumstances we dread. Instead, we find ourselves crushed and helpless, pressed against a rock wall of sorrow or loss. But God, who Himself was once crushed and helpless and nailed to a cross, gently holds us even in that hard place and covers us with His comforting Word of forgiveness and hope.

It may be, as it was with Moses, that we will be permitted to see a passing glimpse of God's glory in a sudden, unexpected healing or a miraculous answer to prayer. Yet even without such a glimpse, in the Word we have already seen the glory of God, safely veiled in human flesh. In Jesus the glory of God was hidden in the weakness and suffering of His death on the cross. In His resurrection that glory was revealed to eyes of faith. Jesus defeated sin and death. He destroyed the rocks and hard places that threaten to crush us in grief and despair. In His death and resurrection, we have the sure and certain hope that one day

we will not just see His glory, we will share it, "When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Col. 3:4).

Until that day, Christ shields us with His nail-scarred hand, "Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen" (Jude 24-25).

PRAYER

God and Savior, though we long to see Your glory, we know that You are with us, as You have promised. Give us the eyes of faith to see Your glory hidden and revealed in the simple water, bread and wine of the sacraments, Your gifts to us. Move us by Your Spirit to come to You in prayer. When we feel crushed and helpless, speak to us, as You spoke to Moses, in Your Holy Word. Strengthen us and uphold us until that day when we see Your glory face to face. Amen.

HYMN

Rejoice, my heart, be glad and sing,
A cheerful trust maintain;
For God, the source of ev'rything,
Your portion shall remain.

He is your treasure, He your joy,
Your life and light and Lord,
Your counselor when doubts annoy,
Your shield and great reward.

Upon your lips, then, lay your hand,
And trust His guiding love;
Then like a rock your peace shall stand
Here and in heav'n above.

("Rejoice, My Heart, Be Glad and Sing," LSB 737 vs. 1, 2, 7)
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UNRELENTING

“And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, ‘In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’ And the Lord said, ‘Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?’” (LUKE 18:1-8).

OFTEN A CRISIS MOVES QUICKLY TO ITS END, perhaps in joy or, more sadly, in tragic loss. Circumstances change so quickly that we scarcely have time to think through the rapidly unfolding events. It is an exhausting experience.

Equally exhausting is a crisis that continues for weeks, months, even years: a lengthy illness, the struggle with a lifelong addiction, frustrated rebuilding efforts after a disaster; with accompanying family, employment and financial stress. In a long term crisis event, we pray and look for answers, sometimes finding none. We may become discouraged. We may, as long days pass, begin to doubt that God is even listening to our prayers.

Jesus knows that we become discouraged. He told a parable to teach us that we “ought always to pray and not lose heart.” In His drama, a widow in search of legal help represents a praying believer. The role of God is portrayed by the unusual character of an unrighteous judge “who neither feared God nor respected man.” We can almost predict the outcome. How can anyone expect a fair and favorable judgment from a character like that? In Jesus’ story, the widow asks for justice against an opponent, someone who has wronged her in some way. The judge initially refuses to help the widow, but she is not easily discouraged. She keeps after him, “Give me justice against my adversary!” She continually pesters the judge; we can imagine her appearing before his judgment seat during the day and pounding on his front door at night. Finally, the judge gives in, even though, as he admits to himself, “I neither fear God nor respect man.” The widow’s persistent pleas have worn him down and he decides the case in her favor.

Jesus gives us a model for our habits of prayer in the pleas of the persistent widow, who was unrelenting (even annoying!) in her petitions for help and justice. Such an excellent role model is useful, but Jesus gives us much more. Although the character in the drama was a somewhat villainous figure, the Holy One to whom we pray bears no resemblance to that unrighteous judge. The God who hears our prayers knows and cares when even a sparrow falls to the ground. He is a loving heavenly

Father who invites us to pray and eagerly listens to our requests with attentive care. Jesus assures us, “Will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.” God gave us His divine justice that was satisfied in Jesus’ death on the cross. Redeemed and forgiven, we are God’s elect, His chosen people. His love is unrelenting and we know He will hear our persistent prayers, “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (HEB. 4:16).

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, when we become discouraged in our prayers, strengthen us by Your Spirit and Your Word. You have invited us to pray and have promised to hear and answer us. Lead us to come before Your throne in persistent prayer, with confidence in Your mercy and loving care. Hear our prayer, now and always, for the sake of Jesus our Savior. Amen.

HYMN

Come, my soul, with ev’ry care,
Jesus loves to answer prayer;
He Himself has bid thee pray,
Therefore will not turn away.

Thou art coming to a King, Large
petitions with thee bring; For His
grace and pow’r are such
None can ever ask too much.

(“Come, My Soul, with Every Care,” LSB 779, vs. 1-2)
Text and Music: Public domain

DEVOTION 12

LIKE CLAY

“But now, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Be not so terribly angry, O LORD, and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all your people” (Is. 64:8-9).

GOD IS THE POTTER AND WE ARE THE CLAY. It is a familiar biblical image and a comforting one. God created us and His hand shapes our lives just as the potter forms clay into useful things. We think of clay as soft and pliable, easily shaped into useful vessels. The shaping, however, is not always pleasant for the clay. Before it can be formed into the intended bowl or vase, the lump of clay may be slammed against the table or the ground to soften it. Then the potter repeatedly punches and kneads and folds the unformed clay to remove any air bubbles that might crack or shatter the finished product. If the clay is shaped on a potter’s wheel, the potter must keep a gentle but firm grip on the clay or the unfinished piece may fly off the rapidly spinning wheel.

It is as if the clay has a mind of its own. With good reason, the prophet spoke of the rebellious Israelites as clay that challenged its Maker, “He did not make me … He has no understanding” (Is. 29:16). For the apostle Paul, the clay represented those who questioned the purpose of God, “Why have you made me like this?” (Rom. 9:20).

Still, for all its rebellious tendencies, the stubborn clay is shaped by the divine potter’s skillful hands. We know His gentle touch, “You are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter.” We also know the less gentle experiences of grief, loss, illness, tragedy, to name a few, that our loving Father permits in order to shape us according to His will, “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:3-5). As clay vessels may be hardened through kiln firing, our faith may be tested and strengthened in fiery trials. Like the hard-worked clay, we know what it is to be crushed and shaped by grief, to repent and receive forgiveness, confident that the destructive air bubbles of sin and guilt are removed through the death and resurrection of our Savior.

Through our trials and suffering, our heavenly Father holds us safely in His firm and gentle grip. We are formed, not in a meaningless or random way, but according to our divine potter’s gracious will. Cleansed from sin through the forgiveness Christ won for us on the cross, we are prepared for useful service in the household of God, “Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a

vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work” (2 Tim. 2:20-21).

PRAYER

Almighty God, You are our Father. We are the clay and You are our potter. Shape us according to Your will. When we turn from Your Word and will and rebel against You, lead us by Your Spirit to repentance. For the sake of Jesus, cleanse us from sin so that we will be useful vessels for honorable service in Your kingdom. Hear our prayer in Jesus’ name. Amen.

HYMN

Praise to the Lord, who has fearfully, wondrously, made you,
Health has bestowed and, when heedlessly falling, has stayed you.

What need or grief
Ever has failed of relief?
Wings of His mercy did shade you.

Praise to the Lord, who will prosper your work and defend you;
Surely His goodness and mercy shall daily attend you.
Ponder anew

What the Almighty can do
As with His love He befriends you.

(“Praise to the Lord, the Almighty,” LSB 790, vs. 3-4)
Text and Music: Public domain

DEVOTION 13

YOUR WILL BE DONE

"Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here, while I go over there and pray.' And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, 'My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.' And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, 'My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will'" (MATT. 26:36-39).

“OUR WILL BE DONE.” This petition of the Lord's Prayer is comforting and familiar. Yet in times of illness or other difficult circumstances we may hesitate as we pray these particular words. Some people may come to see the words as a hopeless addition to a desperate plea for help or healing. They may feel as if they are adding an afterthought, "I hope you do this, Lord, but I am afraid that You won't."

This petition, in words that our Lord gave to us, is not a prayer of cringing doubt. To pray, "Your will be done," is first and foremost to follow Jesus' command, "Pray then like this" (MATT. 6:9). Jesus Himself embodied the words of the prayer He gave us; He lived the words He taught. On the night He was betrayed, Jesus prayed in Gethsemane. In anguish, "sorrowful even to death," He fell face down to the earth and begged, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." Jesus knew what lay before Him. He knew what obedience to the Father's will would require of the Son, yet without hesitation Jesus brought His own request before His Father, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me."

Jesus asked that He might not have to drink the terrible cup of suffering and God's wrath against sin. Then, His petition done, He submitted His will to His Father's, "Not as I will, but as you will." Finished, Jesus stood to face His betrayer and in the morning took up His cross for our salvation. Nailed to the cross, He drained the cup of God's anger against sin so there would be nothing left of it for us to drink. He accomplished His Father's will.

"Your will be done" is not a prayer of doubt. Those words ask God to set His holy will around our prayers and our lives like a great, shielding wall. In his Large Catechism, Martin Luther wrote that Christians armed with these words present a solid wall against which the devil and all enemies "shall dash themselves to pieces." God's will surrounds our lives and our prayers like a fortress. We do not always know "what to pray for as we ought" but the Spirit prays for us "according to the will of God" (ROM. 8:26-27). Our helpless, stumbling and often self-centered prayers are hedged in on all sides by the will of God.

Your will be done. These words are not a prayer of weakness or doubt but a prayer of strength. The words are a plea of hope and trust, brought before a loving Father who desires only the good of His children.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, although I may think I know what is best, and I know what I want, I bring my petitions to You, confident that You will accomplish Your holy will in my life. As Jesus my Lord prayed that Your will would be done as He went to the cross for my salvation, teach me to pray always, "Not as I will, but as You will." Father, I want what You want. Amen.

HYMN

I leave all things to God's direction;
He loves me in both joy and woe.
His will is good, sure His affection;
His tender love is true, I know.
My fortress and my rock is He:
What pleases God, that pleases me.

God knows what must be done to save me;
His love for me will never cease.
Upon His hands He did engrave me
With purest gold of loving grace.
His will supreme must ever be:
What pleases God, that pleases me.

(“I Leave All Things to God’s Direction,” LSB 719, vs. 1-2)
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CONQUERING

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (ROM. 8:35-39).

THE APOSTLE PAUL PRESENTS US WITH A CATALOG OF DISASTERS: tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger and sword. These are things you may have experienced in the distress of illness, the famine of failed crops, loss of employment, the nakedness experienced when storms or floods destroy homes and possessions. These disasters, and others like them, may be something you are enduring now or you may be afraid that such things await you in the future.

Paul begins his list with a question, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” The list of disasters is not designed to frighten us; it serves as a backdrop to highlight the love of Jesus our Savior who faced ultimate disaster for us. For the sake of our salvation, Jesus Christ was betrayed, arrested, condemned, stripped of His garments and nailed to a cross. He suffered hunger and thirst. He died and was sealed in a tomb. The world and the powers of evil did their worst to Him in the form of distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger and sword.

Yet on the third day Jesus rose from the dead. He shattered the powers of sin, death and the devil. The powers of evil did their worst and He rose up and overcame it all. He conquered, and in Him, we conquer. The victory won in His crucifixion, death and resurrection is our victory. In Baptism we share in His death and burial and we are raised in Him to new life, “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (ROM. 6:4).

The victory is already won. Even though “we are being killed all the day long” and “regarded as sheep to be slaughtered,” we are “more than conquerors.” That’s the kind of conqueror Jesus is and that is what we are — overwhelming, shock and awe, overcoming-it-all conquerors. The long list of disasters includes all those things that threaten (unsuccessfully!) to tear us apart from Christ. Death cannot separate us from Him. Life and all that it may hold for us, the spiritual powers of evil or the evil of earthly rulers cannot come between us. Whatever is happening in our lives today or whatever may arise tomorrow cannot separate us from our Lord. No height or depth can separate us, as the psalmist prays, “If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the

morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me” (PS. 139:8-10). Nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. This conquering strength does not depend on our faithful yet feeble grasp, but on the strong grip of our crucified and risen Savior. Sheep to be slaughtered, yes, but sheep of whom the Shepherd says, “No one will snatch them out of my hand” (JOHN 10:28).

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, in Your death and resurrection You have conquered, and in You we too are conquerors. When we are threatened and frightened of the disasters that we must face, strengthen and encourage us with Your Word. We trust the grip of Your hand and know that nothing can separate us from Your love. Amen.

HYMN

Fight the good fight with all your might;
Christ is your strength, and Christ your right.
Lay hold on life, and it shall be
Your joy and crown eternally.

Faint not nor fear, His arms are near;
He changes not who holds you dear;
Only believe, and you will see
That Christ is all eternally.

(“Fight the Good Fight,” LSB 664, vs. 1, 4)
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DEVOTION 15

SET ON HIGH

“Let not the flood sweep over me,
or the deep swallow me up,
or the pit close its mouth over me.

Answer me, O LORD, for your steadfast love is good;
according to your abundant mercy, turn to me.
Hide not your face from your servant;
for I am in distress; make haste to answer me.
Draw near to my soul, redeem me;
ransom me because of my enemies!

You know my reproach,
and my shame and my dishonor;
my foes are all known to you.
Reproaches have broken my heart,
so that I am in despair.
I looked for pity, but there was none,
and for comforters, but I found none.
They gave me poison for food,
and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink ...

But I am afflicted and in pain;
let your salvation, O God, set me on high!” (Ps. 69:15-21, 29).

T HE WORDS OF THE PSALM ARE A PERFECT FIT.
Floods sweep over you; deep trouble swallows you up. You are in distress, feeling shamed and dishonored by what is happening to you, heart-broken and in despair. There is no one to pity you or comfort you. David the psalmist must have had you in mind when he first said these inspired words.

Then, as you read through the verses, you come across these words, “They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.” Walking through the psalm, head down, turned inward on yourself, you suddenly find yourself standing before the cross of your dying Savior. Jesus rasps out the words, “I thirst.” The soldiers on guard “put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth.” When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (JOHN 19:29-30).

The words of the psalm that fit you so well perfectly describe your Savior. A flood of suffering swept over Jesus as He hung in shame and dishonor on the cross. The pit of death closed its mouth over Him. Jesus has known and experienced what you suffer, but He did not simply suffer to express His sympathy for you or to provide a role model for your suffering. He did not just suffer *with* you, He suffered *for* you and in your place. He took the penalty of death that you deserved onto Himself so that the flood of sin and death cannot sweep you away. He suffered and died in your place so that the pit of eternal death can never close its mouth over you. Jesus experienced no pity or compassion as He hung on the cross. Watchers mocked Him and challenged Him to save Himself. He looked for comfort

and found none, not even from His heavenly Father, so that you would be comforted now and through eternity.

Jesus absorbed the poison of death into Himself, and in exchange feeds you with the bread that is His eternally nourishing body. He tasted the sour wine held to His lips and in exchange offers you the sweet wine that is His blood shed for the forgiveness of your sins. Jesus was afflicted and in pain, but God set Him on high! Jesus was raised from death and ascended in triumph to the rule at the right hand of God. In all circumstances, He reigns in your life now. Though you are afflicted and in pain, salvation in Jesus sets you on high, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved — and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:4-7).

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, when I feel swept away by circumstances, strengthen me by Your Word and Spirit. Forgive my sins and nourish my faith in Your Holy Supper. As I am filled with comfort and hope through Your redeeming death and mighty resurrection, lead me to reach out to others and offer to them the comfort found only in You. Amen.

HYMN

Jesus, all our ransom paid,
All Your Father's will obeyed;
By Your suff'rings perfect made:
Hear us, holy Jesus.

Save us in our soul's distress;
Be our help to cheer and bless
While we grow in holiness:
Hear us, holy Jesus.

(“Jesus, in Your Dying Woes,” LSB 447, vs. 16-17)
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LORD, SAVE ME!

"Immediately [Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, 'It is a ghost!' and they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.' And Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, 'O you of little faith, why did you doubt?' And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God'" (MATT. 14:22-33).

OFTEN OUR PRAYERS SPELL OUT OUR PETITIONS IN GREAT DETAIL. We ask for successful surgeries, quick recoveries, safety in storms or financial miracles. We want our heavenly Father to know, and rightly so, every detail of our hopes and fears. With the psalmist we say, "I pour out my soul" (Ps. 42:4). Yet there are times of crisis when we hardly know what to ask. We cannot think. We cannot formulate our own plans. We cannot pray the psalms. We cannot even use the prayer our Lord taught us. The trouble is so deep, the fear so overwhelming, the miracles beyond our hope and comprehension, that we cannot form the words. We manage only a brief and desperate petition, "Lord, help!"

We can pray even that short prayer with confidence, knowing that Jesus will hear and answer. It is a lesson Peter learned on the stormy Sea of Galilee. After miraculously feeding a crowd of five thousand, Jesus sent His disciples ahead across the lake while He remained behind to pray. When He started out to meet them, the winds had stirred up the waves, causing the boat to make slow and painful headway. In the early pre-dawn darkness, the disciples assumed the figure walking toward them was a ghost. They cried out in fear until Jesus identified Himself. Peter wanted more proof. He boldly challenged His Master, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus invited him onto the water and Peter (cautiously?) stepped out of the boat. The disciple successfully walked across the water until he caught sight of the wind-whipped waves. Terrified, he began to sink. If he had time to think about it, Peter might have considered the words of the psalm, "Let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found; surely in the rush of great waters, they shall not

reach him" (Ps. 32:6). But he was sinking fast and there was no time for a long and carefully worded petition. Peter shrieked out a short and desperate prayer, "Lord, save me!" Jesus heard and answered, reaching out and lifting His disciple to safety.

As the hour of His death drew near, Jesus rode into Jerusalem. The cheering crowd surrounded Him with the echoing shouts of a one-word prayer, "Hosanna!" The word, much like Peter's frightened prayer, means "Save us now!" A few days later, on the day we call Good Friday, Jesus would do just that. He answered that brief prayer, dying on the cross to save us all.

When you are overwhelmed by waves of despair, or sinking fast into hopeless grief and pain, join the frightened disciple and the Palm Sunday crowds and cry out in prayer to the Savior who gave His life for you, who stands as Lord of the threatening waves. Use, if you wish, a few brief words, "I am yours, save me" (Ps. 119:94). Whatever the length of your prayer, Jesus will hear and reach out and lift you up into the safety of His love.

PRAYER

Lord, I am yours. Save me. Amen.

HYMN

Ride on, ride on in majesty!
Hark! All the tribes hosanna cry.
O Savior meek, pursue Thy road,
With palms and scattered garments strowed.

Ride on, ride on in majesty!
In lowly pomp ride on to die.
Bow Thy meek head to mortal pain,
Then take, O God, Thy pow'r and reign.

("Ride On, Ride On in Majesty," LSB 441, vs. 1, 5)
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THE LAST ENEMY

“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 COR. 15:20-26).

UNCERTAIN IN THE FACE OF DEATH AND GRIEF, people may say of the one who died, “He is in a better place,” which for a Christian is certainly true. Someone might comment, “It is a blessing,” perhaps referring to a release from pain and illness. These are well-intended comments, but Holy Scripture describes death differently. Death is “the wages of sin” (ROM. 6:23) and “the last enemy” (1 COR. 15:26).

The shepherd boy David once faced, by his own choice, a terrifying enemy. The Philistine giant Goliath had defied the armies of the living God and David decided that he must be stopped. The young man faced the seasoned warrior from a position of weakness, wielding only a slingshot against a fully armed and armored soldier. But David knew what Goliath did not, “The battle is the Lord’s” (1 SAM. 17:47). David hurled a stone from his slingshot and brought down his enemy. The battle was decided, and David ran to the fallen giant and used Goliath’s own sword to cut off the warrior’s head.

Our Lord Jesus, the Son of David, faced His ultimate battle in helpless weakness. Innocent, unarmed, he was nailed to the cross, face to face with a dangerous foe — Satan himself, armed to the teeth with sin and death. But Jesus knew what his ancestor David knew, what Satan could not know, “The battle is the Lord’s.” An unjust trial, a dark day, a beaten and helpless victim hanging from a cross; that was the Lord’s battle plan. With His death and resurrection, wielding death’s own sword, the Son of David brought death down and destroyed its hold over us.

“The wages of sin is death” (ROM. 6:23), and it is a wage we inherited from Adam and Eve, a wage we earn daily for ourselves. Jesus took onto Himself the penalty of death, “the wages of sin” we earned. In the helpless weakness of His death on the cross, and in the triumph of His resurrection, Jesus “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 TIM. 1:10). Yes, we will die, and we may still fear this enemy called death, but it is an enemy that has been robbed of its power.

Those who die trusting in Christ Jesus have “fallen asleep” (1 THESS. 4:14). Immediately upon death, we will be “away from

the body and at home with the Lord” (2 COR. 5:8). Our bodies will sleep in the grave until the Last Day when Jesus returns. When He comes, we will be raised bodily from the grave and dressed in immortality. On that great day, our risen and reigning Savior will destroy death, the last enemy. We will live forever with the Lord and “death will be no more” (REV. 21:4).

While we may still be uncertain of just what to say in the face of death. Scripture offers a suggestion. We should remember our Lord’s return and the certain hope of resurrection and eternal life in His presence, and so “encourage one another with these words” (1 THESS. 4:17-18).

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, death is a frightening enemy, but through Jesus’ death and resurrection, it is an enemy that has been robbed of its power. When the day comes for us, or for our loved ones, to fall asleep in Jesus, comfort and strengthen us by Your Word and Spirit in the certain hope of our resurrection to life on the Last Day. Amen.

HYMN

The foe in triumph shouted
When Christ lay in the tomb;
But lo, he now is routed,
His boast is turned gloom.
For Christ again is free;
In glorious victory
He who is strong to save
Has triumphed o'er the grave.

Now hell, its prince, the devil,
Of all their pow'r are shorn;
Now I am safe from evil,
And sin I laugh to scorn.
Grim death with all its might
Cannot my soul affright;
It is a pow'less form,
Howe'er it rave and storm.

(“Awake, My Heart, with Gladness,” LSB 467, vs. 2, 4)
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PERFECT TIMING

"I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.

My soul makes its boast in the LORD;
let the humble hear and be glad.

Oh, magnify the LORD with me, and
let us exalt his name together!

I sought the LORD, and he answered me
and delivered me from all my fears.

Those who look to him are radiant,
and their faces shall never be ashamed.

This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him
and saved him out of all his troubles.

The angel of the LORD encamps
around those who fear him, and delivers them" (Ps. 34:1-7).

WE KNOW THAT GOD'S TIMING, even though it is perfect, is nothing like our own sense of time. There is no comparison between our calendar and the Lord's, of whom the psalmist says, "For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night" (Ps. 90:4). Yet however different God's timing may be, in the face of illness, tragedy and especially death, for us the timing never seems right.

God, the Creator of time, has experienced time as we do. Jesus, true God and true man, was conceived and born. He "grew and became strong" (LUKE 2:40) and began His public ministry when He was about thirty years old (LUKE 3:23). Jesus' timing during His ministry may not have seemed perfect to those around Him. He arrived at the town of Nain in time to meet up with a funeral procession already in progress for the only son of a grief-stricken widow (LUKE 7:11-17). A man named Jairus begged Jesus to heal his dying daughter, but the Lord stopped for another healing and the girl died before He arrived (LUKE 8:40-41, 49-56). He intentionally delayed His trip to Bethany, arriving after His friend Lazarus died (JOHN 11:1-44).

The hour arrived for Jesus' own death. Did time seem to slow down for Him during those terrible events: His trial, the beatings and the long hours on the cross? Finally it was over and done. Jesus' body was prepared for burial and sealed in the tomb. Time passed, and at the first Easter dawn, His tomb was found open and empty! Jesus rose from the dead and He is alive for all eternity, no longer subject to death and no longer subject to time.

Jesus' timing was, and is, perfect and arranged always for the glory of God. He stopped the funeral procession in Nain and restored the widow's son to life. He comforted those who mourned for Jairus' daughter, then raised her to life. Jesus walked to Lazarus' tomb and wept with those who mourned. Then He ordered the tomb opened and restored his friend to life. The tragic events we experience may drag on through long

hours or move so swiftly that we are left stunned and barely able to respond. Through it all we have our risen Lord's promise, "I am with you always" (MATT. 28:20). Jesus will not delay. Through long hours or rapidly unfolding events, Jesus is present. And when our last hour comes and we fall asleep in Jesus we will, without delay, be "at home with the Lord" (2 COR. 5:8).

One day Jesus will return and bring an end to all funeral processions. As He did with Jairus' daughter and the young man of Nain, the Lord will summon us to rise! We will be raised bodily from graves left as open and empty as Lazarus' tomb, as open and empty as our Lord's own tomb. The timing will of course be perfect, and it will not be our timing, but His.

PRAYER

Jesus, Lord of time, when we suffer through long hours of grief or endure swift and painful circumstances, be present with us as You have promised. Lead us to find hope and encouragement in Your Word. Nourish our faith with forgiveness through Your Holy Supper. Comfort us with Your presence when our last hour comes, confident that You will one day call us to arise from our graves to live in your presence forever. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

HYMN

If thou but trust in God to guide thee
And hope in Him through all thy ways,
He'll give thee strength, whate'er betide thee,
And bear thee through the evil days.
Who trusts in God's unchanging love
Builds on the rock that naught can move.
Sing, pray, and keep His ways unswerving,
Perform thy duties faithfully,
And trust His Word; though undeserving,
Thou yet shalt find it true for thee.
God never yet forsook in need
The soul that trusted Him indeed.

("If Thou But Trust in God to Guide Thee," LSB 750 vs. 1, 7)
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WOUNDS AND SCARS

"Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.' Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed'" (JOHN 20:24-29).

D RUGSTORES AND PHARMACIES OFFER A VARIETY OF WOUND HEALING OINTMENTS AND BANDAGES.

Doctors may carefully suture a wound to diminish, and possibly prevent, an obvious scar. Yet there are scars that will always be visible, injuries from accidents, fires or other trauma. Still other scars remain invisible: fear, depression, anxiety, mistrust; inward reactions that remain barely hidden beneath the surface and may at any time rise up to terrorize the one who bears them.

Jesus had scars, too. During His trial, the Son of God was slapped and scourged. Soldiers crowned Him with thorns. Nails pierced His hands and His feet on the cross. To prove His death, a soldier thrust a spear into His side. Followers took the Lord's battered body down from the cross and buried Him in a sealed tomb.

Then on the third day after His death, at the first Easter dawn, the tomb was found open and empty. Jesus Christ rose bodily from the dead, alive, never to die again. His risen and glorified body still bore the scars of His crucifixion. Those scars of trauma marked Him, identifying Him beyond doubt, as the Crucified One. When Jesus first appeared to His disciples after His resurrection, He "showed them his hands and side" (JOHN 20:19-20). One of the disciples, Thomas, was not present to witness this first appearance and doubted the testimony of the others. He wanted proof. He wanted to see the scars and put his finger "in the mark of the nails" and place his hand in Jesus' spear-scarred side. The Lord appeared once more and invited His skeptical disciple to see and touch His wounds. The scars on Jesus' glorified body were not a mark of defeat, but proof of life and victory. Jesus would later say in His revelation to John, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades" (REV. 1:17-18).

We may have wounds and scars, seen and unseen, on our bodies and in our hearts and minds, but the wounds of Jesus mark us, too. He endured the pain and the penalty of death for

us, "He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed" (Is. 53:5). When you are burdened with the unseen wounds of sin and guilt, call on Jesus, whose nail-scarred hands and feet and spear-pierced side are an eternal witness to the healing forgiveness won for you on the cross. On the Last Day, when Jesus returns, we who trust in Him will be raised bodily from our graves, our lowly, battered bodies transformed "to be like his glorious body" (PHIL. 3:21). Jesus had scars, and He still does, and one day we will see them.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, we know that on the Last Day You will raise us up and transform our lowly bodies to be like Your glorious body. We will see the scars that mark your triumph over sin, death and the devil. Until that great day, give us patience to bear our scars. Lead us by Your Spirit to find peace and healing forgiveness in Your Word and in Your wounds. Amen.

HYMN

Jesus, grant that balm and healing
In your holy wounds I find,
Ev'ry hour that I am feeling
Pains of body and of mind.
Should some evil thought within
Tempt my treach'rous heart to sin,
Show the peril, and from sinning
Keep me from its first beginning.
Ev'ry wound that pains or grieves me
By your wounds, Lord, is made whole;
When I'm faint, Your cross revives me,
Granting new life to my soul.
Yes, Your comfort renders sweet
Ev'ry bitter cup I meet;
For Your all-aton ing passion
Has procured my soul's salvation.

("Jesus, Grant That Balm and Healing," LSB 421, vs. 1, 4)
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OUT OF THE DEPTHS

"Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!

O LORD, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my pleas for mercy!

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,

O LORD, who could stand?

But with you there is forgiveness,

that you may be feared.

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the LORD

more than watchmen for the morning,
more than watchmen for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the LORD!

For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is plentiful redemption.

And he will redeem Israel

from all his iniquities" (PSALM 130).

FROM WHAT DEPTHS DO YOU CRY TO THE LORD?

From what depths do you cry to the Lord? Loss, grief, illness, anxiety, the death of a loved one or the prospect of your own death may become deep pits from which you cannot escape. No matter the depth of despair, God hears your cries and stands ready to lift you up. Holy Scripture testifies to His long practice in doing just that.

Joseph, the favored son of the Old Testament patriarch Jacob, received from God dreams of future power and authority. Angered by those dreams, his brothers threw Joseph into a pit, perhaps a deep, dry well. Raised from the pit, Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt where, after a time, he once more found himself in another kind of pit, Pharaoh's prison. Even there, "the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love" (GEN. 39:21). According to God's steadfast love and perfect timing, Joseph was freed and raised to the position of power revealed in his dreams.

Jonah fled from the Lord to avoid proclaiming God's Law and healing forgiveness to the enemies of Israel. To restore His reluctant prophet to His service, God allowed Jonah to be thrown into sea, where a great fish was appointed to swallow him up. Jonah prayed from that slimy pit, "I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me" (JONAH 2:2). On the third day, God restored Jonah to dry land, and at the prophet's proclamation, the people of Nineveh repented of their sins.

The prophet Daniel was an exiled Israelite in the service of King Darius the Mede. Faithful to the God of Israel, even when the king had forbidden such worship, Daniel was condemned to death and sealed in a pit of hungry lions. God sent His angel

into the depths of that pit to shut the lions' mouths, and Daniel was set free and restored to his position of authority.

What Joseph, Jonah and Daniel experienced, our Lord also knew. Like Jonah, Jesus prayed in distress as He faced death. Like Joseph, Jesus was betrayed and delivered into captivity. Like Daniel, the Son of God was condemned to death, but no angel came down to save Him. This was the purpose for which He had come, to carry our sins in His own body to the cross. Suffering the penalty of death in our place, Jesus was taken down from the cross and sealed in a tomb, a pit of death. Then, like Jonah restored, on the third day Jesus was raised to life and exalted to reign at the right hand of God. All authority in heaven and on earth is His (MATT. 28:18).

Whatever the depths in which you find yourself, you are never out of reach for our almighty Savior. He hears your prayers, and with His healing presence He descends into the depths with you. As He restored His saints of old, He will lift you up according to His gracious will, "And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you" (1 PETER 5:10).

PRAYER

Almighty God and Savior, when I am lost in despair and doubt, hear my prayer from the depths. As You once descended into the depths of death for me, descend again into my darkness. As You rose up from death to give me eternal life, lift me up now with Your healing Word of peace. Forgive my sins, restore and strengthen me that I might serve You and bring glory to Your name. Amen.

HYMN

From depths of woe I cry to Thee,
In trial and tribulation;
Bend down Thy gracious ear to me,
Lord, hear my supplication.
If Thou rememb'rest ev'ry sin,
Who then could heaven ever win
Or stand before Thy presence?

Therefore my hope is in the Lord
And not in mine own merit;
It rests upon His faithful Word
To them of contrite spirit
That He is merciful and just;
This is my comfort and my trust.
His help I wait with patience.

("From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee," LSB 607, vs. 1, 3)
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THE LIGHT OF HOPE

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (**JOHN 1:1-5**).

A SEVERE STORM CAN BE TERRIFYING, and a storm that strikes in darkness even more so. A power failure plunges homes or an entire town into cold darkness. With the night comes a fear of the unknown, not just childhood fears of that monster in the closet, but real and reasonable fears of lost loved ones, looting or falling debris. In that kind of darkness, even the smallest light can make a difference: a candle, a flashlight, maybe the headlights of a rescue vehicle. Light means hope.

God created light. He spoke it into existence on the first day of creation. He of course knew what we have learned in our experience of darkness, "God saw that the light was good" (**GEN. 1:4**). God separated the light from the darkness, providing for the orderly arrangement of night and day. The newly created world was plunged into a new kind of darkness, not the restful, restoring darkness of God's night, but a heavy curtain of sin and death brought into existence by human rebellion against the Creator. The darkness of sin was a place to hide, "People loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil" (**JOHN 3:19**).

God loved the world He created and so He sent light, this time in the Person of His Son, the Word made flesh. Jesus is life and light. He said of Himself, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (**JOHN 8:12**). Jesus descended into our darkness and, for a short time, He allowed the darkness to gain the upper hand. On the night of His betrayal, knowing that darkness would soon overwhelm Him, Jesus prayed in anguish, ultimately trusting Himself to His Father's will. Jesus told those who came to arrest Him that night, "This is your hour, and the power of darkness" (**LUKE 22:53**). Jesus bore the heavy weight of the world's darkness, the darkness of our sin, in His own body on the cross. He died in the darkness of failed sunlight and was sealed in a tomb. For a time, the darkness swallowed up our Savior, but Jesus is the light no darkness can overcome. In the early light of dawn, His tomb was found open and empty. The Light of the world has risen from the dead! In Him the promise is fulfilled, that God will "swallow up ... the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever" (**Is. 25:7-8**).

Light means hope, and Jesus is the Light that no darkness, no storm, no fear and no loss can overcome. For Him, "darkness is not dark" and "night is as bright as day" (**Ps. 139:12**). Jesus is the light who is always present with us in His Word and in His body and blood, given and shed for the forgiveness of our

sins. He will one day bring us out of this world still filled with darkness into the eternal light of His presence, where "night will be no more" (**REV. 22:5**).

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, when darkness of any kind threatens to overcome me, be present with the light of Your love, forgiveness and hope. Let Your light shine through me with growing brightness so that I can bring comfort and hope to others who suffer in the darkness of sin, grief or disaster. Comfort me with the certain hope of eternal life in the light of Your presence. Amen.

HYMN

Christ, whose glory fills the skies,
Christ, the true and only light,
Sun of righteousness, arise;
Triumph o'er the shades of night.
Dayspring from on high, be near;
Daystar, in my heart appear.

Visit then this soul of mine,
Pierce the gloom of sin and grief;
Fill me, radiancy divine,
Scatter all my unbelief;
More and more Thyself display,
Shining to the perfect day.

("Christ, Whose Glory Fills the Skies," *LSB 873*, vs. 1, 3)
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DEVOTION 22

RESCUED

"How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

 How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I take counsel in my soul

 and have sorrow in my heart all the day?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O LORD my God;

 light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,
lest my enemy say, 'I have prevailed over him,'

 lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.

But I have trusted in your steadfast love;

 my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

I will sing to the LORD,

 because he has dealt bountifully with me" (**PSALM 13**).

CAN GOD FORGET YOU? Can God forget anything or anyone? David is certain that God has done just that. He asks, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" The psalmist is overcome with sorrow. He has enemies ready to rejoice at his failings, perhaps ready to celebrate his death. Where is God? Why doesn't He do something? Why doesn't He come to the rescue?

There are many accounts in the Bible describing God's rescue of His people. He heard their frantic prayers and delivered them. Trapped between the Red Sea and Pharaoh's army, "the people of Israel cried out to the LORD" (**Ex. 14:10**). God parted the waters to let His people escape, and sent the sea back again to sweep away Israel's enemies. Faithful Daniel was thrown into the lions' den, but God "sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths" (**DAN. 6:22**). When a storm threatened the disciples, Jesus, asleep in the boat, awoke and commanded the wind and sea, "Peace! Be still!" (**MARK 4:39**).

In this psalm there is no report of a divine rescue. As far as we know, David's enemies are not destroyed. There appears to be no answer from God to relieve David's sorrow. No angel appears in a dream to offer direction. The Lord's face remains hidden. Has God forgotten? No, the Lord has not forgotten His servant, and David knows that because David has not forgotten. The psalmist had trusted in the steadfast love of the Lord in the past, and he could trust that same steadfast love now. The Lord had blessed him before, so David was ready once more with a song of praise.

Has the Lord forgotten you? Has He turned His face from your sorrow? He has not. Scripture tells us, "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end" (**LAM. 3:22**). The steadfast love in which David trusted remains steadfast for you today. Another psalm expresses a prayer and a past rescue mission: "In my distress I called upon the LORD ... He rescued me from my strong enemy and from those who hated me" (**Ps. 18:6, 17**).

Yet in God's long record of successful rescues, there is one event in which there was no rescue. He did not fail; He did not even make the attempt. God saw His own Son nailed to the cross for the sins of the world, for your sins. Jesus' enemies mocked Him, "He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him" (**MATT. 27:43**). God did not deliver His Son from the cross, so that through Jesus' death and resurrection, we would be delivered from enemies ready to exalt themselves over us: sin, death and the devil. Secure in such steadfast love, we can say with the apostle Paul, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom" (**2 TIM. 4:18**).

PRAYER

Almighty God, when I am tempted to doubt Your steadfast love, lead me to see the rescues recorded in Your Holy Word. You heard the prayers of Your saints and saved them, and through the gift of Your Son, my Savior Jesus Christ, You have rescued me from sin, death and the devil and brought me safely into Your heavenly kingdom. Amen.

HYMN

O God, forsake me not!
Your gracious presence lend me;
Lord, lead Your helpless child;
Your Holy Spirit send me
That I my course may run.
O be my light, my lot,
My staff, my rock, my shield —
O God, forsake me not!

O God, forsake me not!
Take not Your Spirit from me;
Do not permit the might
Of sin to overcome me.
Increase my feeble faith,
Which You alone have wrought.
O be my strength and pow'r —
O God, forsake me not!

("O God, Forsake Me Not," *LSB 731*, vs. 1-2)
Tune and Music: Public domain

DEVOTION 23

HOPE RESTORED

"That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, 'What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?' And they stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?' And he said to them, 'What things?' And they said to him, 'Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened. Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.' And he said to them, 'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself'" (*LUKE 24:13-27*).

WE CLING TO HOPE AS TIGHTLY AS WE CAN, for as long as we can. But sometimes our hope is swept away in a sudden turn of events, a personal or natural disaster or, if enough time passes, hope just slips away. Two of Jesus' followers, walking to the village of Emmaus on the first Easter afternoon, had lost hope quickly and unexpectedly. They believed in Jesus. They listened to His teaching and witnessed His miracles. They heard the testimony of others as to what Jesus had said and done. These two were certain He was the long-awaited Savior, the Messiah of Israel. But now He was dead and buried and their hope was buried with Him, "We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel."

Then, as they continue down the road, the risen Lord, unrecognized, joins them. He listens as they discuss the events surrounding His death and resurrection. Jesus listens to their story of lost hope, and then He tells them His story. All that had happened to Him unfolded exactly as God planned, exactly as the Scriptures foretold. Finally, after hearing the story of their salvation, the two astonished travelers recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread. Hopelessness came face to face with living Hope in the flesh!

We can lose hope as easily as the two disciples on the way to Emmaus. In personal tragedies that hit close to home, or in disasters with a wider reach, we may react as those disciples did, "We had hoped that the storm would pass us by, that our loved one

would recover or that such a terrible tragedy would never happen here." Like the Emmaus travelers we might rehearse and replay the tragic events, even wondering what we could have done differently or what we should have done or said that we did not do or say. Hope slips away to be replaced by regret and doubt.

In our hopelessness, as He did with His two followers on that sad road, Jesus walks with us, unseen, but present. As God was moving and reigning in the tragic circumstances of our Savior's suffering and death, so He moves and reigns in ways beyond our understanding, through the tragic events we endure. Just as Jesus explained the Scriptures to His fellow travelers, He is present among us with the comfort and encouragement of His Word. As He was recognized in Emmaus in the breaking of bread, He comes among us in the bread and wine that are His body and blood in His Holy Supper.

The risen Savior told His two followers that it was necessary that He suffer and die and to enter His glory. He suffered and died in our place, taking our sins onto Himself. He rose up in glory to overcome for us the ultimate and hopeless disaster of death and eternal separation from God. He rose to life to give us hope, "a living hope ... an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven" for us (*1 PETER 1:3-4*). Earthly hopes may be crushed, but the hope that Jesus brings can never fade away. It is hope that will never disappoint us.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, when my earthly hopes are shattered, strengthen me with the promises of Your Word and with the forgiveness given in Your Holy Supper. Comfort and encourage me with the eternal hope found only in Your redeeming death and resurrection. I know that Your hope will never disappoint me. Amen.

HYMN

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
No merit of my own I claim
But wholly lean on Jesus' name,

On Christ, the solid rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand.

When darkness veils His lovely face,
I rest on His unchanging grace;
In ev'ry high and stormy gale
My anchor holds within the veil.

On Christ, the solid rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand.

His oath, His covenant and blood
Support me in the raging flood;
When ev'ry earthly prop gives way,
He then is all my hope and stay.

On Christ, the solid rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand.

("My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less," *LSB 575*, vs. 1-3)
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PRAY LIKE THIS

"And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil'" (MATT. 6:7-13).

WHEN WE CAN'T THINK OF ANYTHING TO SAY, when we have no words of our own left, we have the words that Jesus taught us. The Lord's Prayer addresses all of our needs of body and soul, even in the most terrifying and desperate circumstances.

In Jesus' prayer, we glorify our Father's name, asking that it be regarded as holy, even during the trouble we endure. Jesus taught His disciples not to be anxious, but instead to, "Seek first the kingdom of God" (MATT. 6:33), and in this prayer we seek just that, asking that God's kingdom would come. We pray, "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." We long for the holy angels, who certainly carry out God's will in heaven, to protect us in our earthly circumstances. In all circumstances, we trust our Father's good and perfect will. In Jesus' prayer we ask for our "daily bread," a petition that includes all of our physical needs for food, shelter, safety and healing. We ask God to forgive our sins, including our sins of selfishness, blame and faithlessness; this is also a petition that reminds us to forgive others as we have been forgiven. We pray, "Lead us not into temptation," that we not fall victim to Satan's efforts to lead us into faithless despair.

The final petition is one we may find ourselves praying over and over again, pleading with our heavenly Father to "deliver us from evil." It is a petition answered fully and finally in the work of our Savior Jesus Christ, who by His death and resurrection delivered us from the overpowering evil of sin, death and the devil, and from the ultimate evil of eternal death and separation from the presence of God.

As we pray the prayer that He taught us, we remember that Jesus Himself embodied its words. To pray His prayer is to wrap ourselves in Jesus' own Words and work. He is the only Son of the Father, who hallowed, or glorified, His Father's name in all that He did. In Jesus the kingdom comes and in His life, death and resurrection, the Father's will was perfectly carried out on earth. Jesus is Himself our daily bread, the Bread of life, who nourishes and sustains us in Word and Sacrament. Only through His sacrifice on the cross are our sins forgiven, forgiveness that, through the power of His Spirit, is ours to share. For us Jesus was led into temptation, overcoming it on our behalf.

He has delivered us from every evil that would threaten to separate us from His love.

The closing petition, "For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever," is not found in Scripture. This joyful response was added in the earliest centuries of the Church. They are words echoing from the courts of heaven, shouted by those who have been delivered from every evil of body and soul, "Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen!" (REV. 7:12)

PRAYER

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven; give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

HYMN

Our Father, who from heav'n above
Bids all of us to live in love
As members of one family
And pray to You in unity,
Teach us no thoughtless words to say
But from our inmost hearts to pray.

From evil, Lord, deliver us;
The times and days are perilous.
Redeem us from eternal death,
And, when we yield our dying breath,
Console us, grant us calm release,
And take our souls to You in peace.

Amen, that is, so shall it be.
Make strong our faith in You, that we
May doubt not but with trust believe
That what we ask we shall receive.
Thus in Your name and at Your Word
We say, "Amen, O hear us, Lord!"

("Our Father, Who from Heaven Above," LSB 766, vs. 1, 8, 9)
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DEVOTION 25

SACRIFICE

"For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him" (HEB. 9:24-28).

IN MANY OR PERHAPS IN ALL DISASTERS AND PERSONAL TRAGEDIES THERE IS SACRIFICE. There is, of course, the unwilling loss of home or possessions, or even of life itself. But in such circumstances, people involved may willingly risk their lives and even sacrifice themselves for others. A husband loses his life in an attempt to protect his wife and family. A mother dies shielding her children from storms. Even young children have tried to protect their brothers and sisters.

Even more familiar are the stories of sacrifice on the part of emergency personnel. Through storms and their aftermath, in piles of debris or raging floodwaters, rescuers risk their lives and safety, not for loved ones, but for strangers. As we pray for our own safety and for those we love, we also pray for those whose task it is to save and bring aid to others.

Sacrifices such as these, willingly, selflessly made for the sake of others, are a picture of the single sacrifice that provided for us an eternal rescue. In the storm of sin and eternal death that swept over us, there was no shelter, no safe place to hide. Jesus our Lord, who stilled the storm on the Sea of Galilee, did not still this deadly storm or turn away from it. For us, in our place, He stepped into the overwhelming winds and waves of sin and death. He allowed that storm to sweep over Him, to do its worst to Him, "The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish" (PS. 116:3). There was no rescue for Him as the storm of death and sin crushed Him.

Yet there was a rescue for us. In willing sacrifice, Jesus took onto Himself the penalty of death that we deserve for our sins. Then, on the third day after His death, Jesus rose up from death. The Lord of wind and wave was in command, "I lay down my life of my own accord that I may take it up again" (JOHN 10:17). Earthly storms may hurt us and steal away property and possessions, but the eternal storm of death has been robbed of all power over us. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, through faith in His name, we have forgiveness for our sins, the certain hope of eternal life and eternal shelter in His presence.

As redeemed people, we are called to offer ourselves for others as our Lord offered up Himself for us, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (ROM. 12:1). Even those who have experienced loss may sacrifice what they can to help neighbors in need, sharing what food, shelter or comfort they can. And there is a willing sacrifice that we can all share. Crying out to God in the midst of loss or in relief that a disaster left us untouched, all of us can offer up the sacrifice of prayer for others, "Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!" (PS. 141:2).

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, by Your death and resurrection You rescued us from the deadly storm of sin and death. In You we have the promise of shelter in Your presence, now and for all eternity. Shield us always with Your mighty power so that our faith will not waver, however strong the storms that assault us. Strengthen us through Your Word and Your Holy Supper so that we, in turn, can help others in need and offer up on their behalf the sacrifice of prayer in Your name. Amen.

HYMN

Ye who think of sin but lightly
Nor suppose the evil great
Here may view its nature rightly,
Here its guilt may estimate.
Mark the sacrifice appointed,
See who bears the awful load;
'Tis the Word, the Lord's anointed,
Son of Man and Son of God.

Here we have a firm foundation,
Here the refuge of the lost:
Christ, the Rock of our salvation,
Is the name of which we boast;
Lamb of God, for sinners wounded,
Sacrifice to cancel guilt!
None shall ever be confounded
Who on Him their hope have built.

("Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted," LSB 451, vs. 3-4)
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DEVOTION 26

COME TO ME

"At that time Jesus declared, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light'" (MATT. 11:25-30).

PERSONAL TRAGEDIES AND NATURAL DISASTERS ALIKE TAKE A PERSONAL TOLL.

In body, mind and soul, there is a price to be paid. Adrenaline pumps through our bodies in a crisis, leaving us shaken and exhausted. Fear and anxiety drain our emotions. Then, once the disaster is past, the work is just beginning — hard work.

Help is given and first aid rendered. Clean up follows. Debris must be removed. Rescue and recovery efforts stretch out into hours and days and weeks of anxiety and hope. The hunt continues for the few precious possessions left behind. Government and insurance forms must be sorted out. Cleaning, packing and moving may follow. What can be salvaged? Even in disasters of a more personal nature, perhaps illness or death in a family, the grief alone is exhausting. Then there are those necessary details and decisions about memorials, finances, insurance, possessions; every small step a painful reminder of loss.

With the physical and mental and emotion exhaustion there may come a kind of spiritual emptiness as well. Not doubt really, but perhaps a sense of simply running out of words, even in prayer, as if there is nothing left to say. Yet there is something left to say and, in the center of our empty exhaustion stands Jesus, with just the right words. His invitation and His promise are what we need to hear: "Come to me ... and I will give you rest."

Jesus is gentle and humble. He is not demanding. He gives of Himself. He places no burden of work or guilt on us. With Jesus there is no, "Do this! Do that! Only then will I bless you!" The yoke of faith, this harness that binds us to Him, is easy because it is not of our doing. It is a gift to us, a gift created by the Holy Spirit. Its burden of faithful, holy living is light because Jesus bears it for us and in us.

Jesus lifts from your shoulders the burden of sin and guilt. He takes from you the draining questions and doubts, "I could have done more." "If only I had arrived on time." "Why didn't God do something?" God has done something. He took the weight of our guilt and shame and placed it on His Son. Bearing the awful weight of our sins and the sins of the whole world, Jesus was nailed to the cross. He died in our place and rose to life to set us

free. The heavy burden of sin was left behind, at the cross and in His empty tomb.

Our crucified and risen Lord feeds us with His Word and with His body and blood in Holy Communion. His forgiveness restores us. His Spirit floods us with new life and strength. We live, even surrounded by storm and loss, in the hope of rest to come. God rested from His work of creation and blessed the Sabbath. On a Sabbath, our Lord once slept in death in the tomb, His work of saving us complete. So for us also, "there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God" (HEB. 4:9). Then will come the waking to endless joy and our Savior's invitation, "Come to Me."

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, when we are exhausted by the events of life, comfort us and fill us with strength to continue with the work that remains to be done. When we are burdened by sin, enfold us in Your forgiveness and rest. Lead us to find refreshment in Word and Sacrament, so that we might share with others the comfort and hope that we have in You. Amen.

HYMN

"Come unto Me, ye weary,
And I will give you rest."
O blessed voice of Jesus,
Which comes to hearts oppressed!
It tells of benediction,
Of pardon, grace and peace,
Of joy that hath no ending,
Of love that cannot cease.

"Come unto Me, ye fainting,
And I will give you life."
O cheering voice of Jesus,
Which comes to aid our strife!
The foe is stern and eager,
The fight is fierce and long;
But Thou hast made us mighty
And stronger than the strong.

("Come unto Me, Ye Weary," LSB 684 vs. 1, 3)
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CALLED BY NAME

“But now thus says the LORD,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
‘Fear not, 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 shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior … I, I am he
who blots out your transgressions for my own sake,
and I will not remember your sins” (Is. 43:1-3, 25).

GOD MADE A COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM, promising that out of his descendants a great nation would arise. From among these descendants the Messiah would be born, the Savior who would be a blessing to all nations (Gen. 12:3). Abraham's descendants were the people of Israel. God called Israel by name. He chose them, He created them to be His royal, holy people. “Fear not,” God tells the people of Israel. Flood or fire, whatever they endure, God will walk through it all with them. He endures troubled times with them, not because of anything they have done, not because they deserve His presence, but because God has claimed them as His own.

Perhaps you too have passed through flood or fire, suffering through those disasters or in other tragedies. You were not consumed entirely, but may have suffered terrible loss. Still, just as God promised His people long ago, He is with you, enduring with you as you endure. Even these disasters cannot overwhelm or burn or consume you, for God is “the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.” He has called you by name. He has redeemed you and claimed you as His own.

In your Baptism, God placed His name on you, “in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” and claimed you as His own. You are redeemed, your sins washed away in Jesus’ blood. You were adopted as a son or daughter of God. To you the Savior says, “Fear not!” You need not be afraid, because Jesus Himself passed “through the waters” for you. He endured the overwhelming, burning flood of pain, suffering and death, and He passed through it alone, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46)

Jesus took onto Himself the penalty of death that you had earned for yourself. He passed through flood and fire and was consumed by it, so that you would not be consumed eternally by the fires of hell. Yet having passed through the fiery flood, He emerged in victory, overcoming it all, rising up from the grave. Just as His death is yours, His victory is also yours. God said, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.” When you passed through the waters of Baptism, you were

united by the Spirit and the Word with Jesus Christ, “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rom. 6:4-5). Whatever you pass through, whatever you endure, it cannot ultimately consume you, because Jesus, who has already overcome it all, is with you.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, you called me to be Your child in Holy Baptism. You have redeemed me and called me by name. When I endure troubled days and nights, when I pass through flood and fire, be present with me. Sustain and encourage me through Your Word and through the comfort of my brothers and sisters in Christ. Hear my prayer for the sake of Jesus my Lord, who gave His life for me. Amen.

HYMN

Baptized into Your name most holy,
O Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
I claim a place, though weak and lowly,
Among Your saints, Your chosen host.
Buried with Christ and dead to sin,
Your Spirit now shall live within.

My loving Father, here You take me
To be henceforth Your child and heir.
My faithful Savior, here You make me
The fruit of all Your sorrows share.
O Holy Spirit, comfort me
When threat'ning clouds around I see.

(“Baptized into Your Name Most Holy,” LSB 590, vs. 1-2)
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A DESOLATE PLACE

"And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, 'Everyone is looking for you.' And he said to them, 'Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.' And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons" (MARK 1:35-39).

DURING HIS EARTHLY MINISTRY, after long and busy days of teaching and healing, Jesus would sometimes withdraw from the crowds for a while to pray. Early in the morning or all through the night, He would search out a desolate place, a place to be alone with His heavenly Father. Refreshed in prayer, and discovered by His searching disciples, He would again take up His work of proclaiming the kingdom of God.

Like our Lord, we too may sometimes find ourselves in a desolate place, but it may not be a place of our own choosing. The desolate place may be exactly that, desolate, a place torn apart, left destroyed and abandoned by storm, flood or fire. The desolate place may not be an actual, physical location. We may be wrapped up in another kind of desolation, an inward, empty, hidden place of fear, grief, loneliness or regret. Yet however empty and cheerless the physical place or the space within ourselves, it is a place to do what Jesus did there — pray. Even though the place, in our world or in our hearts, may seem deserted and lonely, it really is not desolate at all. Just as the Father was present in the desolation, listening to the prayers of His Son, through faith in Jesus' name we can be confident that our heavenly Father hears our prayers, too, even in such a wilderness.

"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (HEB. 4:16). We approach the throne of grace with confidence because our Savior endured for us a desolate place unlike any other. Innocent of all sin within Himself, He took our sin and guilt and carried it all in His own body to the cross. Nailed up in that cheerless place of death, He was deserted by His friends and ridiculed by His enemies. Even His heavenly Father, who had so often met Him in every other lonely place, abandoned His Son to suffering and death. Jesus, in that lonely place, suffered the just penalty for the sins of the world, for our sins.

Jesus prayed there too, at that dark and cruel execution site outside of Jerusalem. We don't know all that He said to His Father in His early morning prayers, but we know His prayers from the cross. He begged His Father to forgive those who carried out his execution, to forgive us, whose sins put Him there, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (LUKE 23:34). He cried out from the desolation of His heart: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (MATT. 27:46). Finally, the work of

our salvation finished, the debt of our sins paid, Jesus prayed in confident hope of life and resurrection to come, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" (LUKE 23:46).

That is our prayer too, in a desolate place, in every place. It is a prayer of trust and certain hope, "Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God" (PS. 31:5).

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, for us you suffered the desolation of the cross. Be present with us when we are alone and afraid, in an actual place of desolation or in a lonely place within ourselves. Nourish and strengthen us with Your Word and Spirit. Hear our prayers and comfort us, so that we in turn might share Your comfort and hope with others in need. Amen.

HYMN

Jesus, refuge of the weary,
Blest Redeemer, whom we love,
Fountain in life's desert dreary,
Savior from the world above:
Often have Your eyes, offended,
Gazed upon the sinner's fall;
Yet upon the cross extended,
You have borne the pain of all.

Jesus, may our hearts be burning
With more fervent love for You;
May our eyes be ever turning
To behold Your cross anew
Till in glory parted never
From the blessed Savior's side,
Graven in our hearts forever,
Dwell the cross, the Crucified.

("Jesus, Refuge of the Weary," LSB 423, vs. 1, 3)
Tune and Music: Public domain

DEVOTION 29

STORM

"On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, 'Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?' And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'" (MARK 4:35-41).

WE KNOW AND BELIEVE THAT GOD LOVES US AND THAT, in Christ, He gives us peace. But when tragedy strikes, when we are filled with grief and fear, we may forget. Peace? It is not possible, we think, certainly not now, maybe not ever.

The disciples knew about Jesus' peace and power. That is, they knew until they forgot about it. After a day of teaching and healing, Jesus and His disciples crossed the Sea of Galilee. In a sudden storm, the wind howled around them and the boat took on water. Psalm 107 describes a similar scene, "They mounted up to heaven; they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their evil plight; they reeled and staggered like drunken men and were at their wits' end" (Ps. 107:26-27). Where was Jesus? Why didn't He rescue them? Jesus was there all along, sound asleep in the back of the boat. The disciples woke Him and asked the frantic question we might have asked, "We're going to die! Don't you care?"

Jesus woke and commanded the wind and water, "Peace! Be still!" The psalm continues, "Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad that the waters were quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven" (Ps. 107:28-30). Jesus cared, and He was right there with in the storm-tossed boat with His disciples. We also ask Jesus, "Do You care? Where are You?" The answer is the same for us as it was for the disciples. Jesus cares. He is with us in our storm-tossed boat of terror and grief. As the frightened disciples searched for their sleeping Lord, we search for him, too, in desperate prayer. Jesus is present with us. He is in command of the storms that threaten us.

Peace is found in Jesus. The storm happened; the disciples' boat filled. Jesus didn't turn back the clock and undo the storm. In terrified, desperate prayer, the disciples found Him and, as the psalmist said, "He brought them to their desired haven." Jesus spoke His Word of peace and brought His frightened disciples to a place of peace and safety. "Peace I leave with you," Jesus said, "My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to

you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid" (JOHN 14:27). Worldly peace depends on circumstances, or rather, the absence of those circumstances: no war, no storms, no illness, no violence or evil. Jesus' peace is not found in the right set of events. His peace is found in His forgiveness, His power and His presence, right here, right now, wherever we are, however frightening the events that surround us. He will speak to us in His Word and by His Spirit grant to us His peace.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, You rescued Your disciples in the threatening storm. Be present with us in every storm of life that frightens us. When we call to You, hear our prayers. Forgive our sins and through Your Word and Your Holy Supper, fill us with the peace that You alone can give. Amen.

HYMN

When distress and trouble grieve us,
Bringing illness, storm or loss,
May we, patiently enduring,
Bear with faithfulness the cross.
As we, Lord, receive Your mercy,
May we then Your mercy share,
Giving comfort, hope, and care.
For this work may we be nourished,
As our hearts to love are stirred,
By Your Spirit and Your Word.

In the world, Lord, You have told us
There is trouble to endure.
Fill our doubting hearts with courage,
For in You our hope is sure.
As with Your disciples sailing
On the windy, storm-tossed sea,
You awoke and heard their plea,
Stilling storm and wind and water,
Bid our fear and sorrow cease
With Your quiet Word of peace.

("Lord and Savior, Do You Hear Us," Tune: "Let Us Ever Walk With Jesus")
Tune and Music: Public domain

DEVOTION 30

THORNS AND WEAKNESS

"So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 COR. 12:7-10).

Upon calling Paul into his service, the Lord said, "I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:16). And suffer Paul did, "Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches" (2 COR. 11:24-28).

Beaten, unjustly imprisoned, stoned and left for dead, shipwrecked, suffering from hunger, cold and anxiety about the churches he served; Paul was very familiar with disaster. He also endured a very personal, ongoing source of torment, his thorn in the flesh. The thorn may have been a health problem such as epilepsy, malaria or a problem with his eyesight, or it may have been the persecution he endured. Paul said that the Lord permitted this affliction to prevent pride over the many divine revelations the apostle received. There was a purpose in it, yet Paul still pleaded with the Lord, as we all do when we are hurting, to remove the painful thorn.

Still, the thorn remained. The Lord's answer was not about Paul. It was about what the Lord had done, and continued to do, for His suffering apostle, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." My grace. My power. God has given us what we need above all else; forgiveness and eternal life, gifts freely given by grace through faith in Christ Jesus. No disaster, pain, tragedy or grief can take those gracious gifts from us. We have those gifts because God's power was made perfect in weakness. His power was revealed, His will accomplished — in weakness. God's mighty power was revealed in the weakness of a helpless, newborn infant in a manger in Bethlehem. His power was on display in the weak, suffering, innocent victim nailed to a cross outside the walls of Jerusalem, a victim *crowned* with thorns. The unbelieving world looks at

the cross and sees only defeat and weakness, a loss, not a victory. We who trust in Christ look to the cross and see our salvation there. During long days and longer nights of pain and grief you find peace, not in your strength or your ability to cope with the situation, but in the grace and weakness of Jesus, who suffered, died and triumphed over death for you. When you are weak, God, who knew the weakness of the manger and the cross, is with you and brings His grace, His strength and His peace.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, when the thorns we encounter in life bring us pain and grief, turn our hearts to the weakness and triumph of the cross. Help us by Your Spirit to trust You in all circumstances, knowing that Your grace is enough for us because Your power was revealed in the weakness of the manger and the cross. Amen.

HYMN

What child is this, who, laid to rest,
On Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet
While shepherds watch are keeping?
This, this is Christ the king,
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing:
Haste, haste to bring Him laud,
The babe, the son of Mary!

Why lies He in such mean estate
Where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christian fear; for sinners here
The silent Word is pleading.
Nails, spear shall pierce Him through,
The cross be borne for me, for you;
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,
The babe, the son of Mary!

("What Child Is This?" LSB 370, vs. 1-2)
Tune and Music: Public domain

DEVOTION 31

THE SHEPHERD

"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever" (PSALM 23).

GOD'S PEOPLE HAVE BEEN PRAYING THOSE TREASURED WORDS, "The LORD is my shepherd," and clinging to them in troubled times, since the day David, the "the sweet psalmist of Israel" (2 SAM. 23:1) was inspired by the Holy Spirit to compose them. The psalm is often used in worship, but saints also recite its words from memory in dark places, in terrifying situations and during long and empty stretches of grief and loss. It is a psalm of comfort, hope and trust. It is the psalm of a shepherd, but perhaps it is better described as the confident prayer of the sheep.

The Lord is my Shepherd. The sheep want for nothing, because the Shepherd cares for His sheep, His precious people, and provides everything they need. The sheep know that they are safe in His care. This Shepherd provides good pasture to nourish them and still waters to satisfy their thirst. He leads them in just the right pathways. We are the sheep of this psalm, and we follow along in the footsteps of Jesus, our Shepherd.

There are unsettling times when the flock must travel paths that pass through the shadow of death. That shadowed valley threatens us, but we walk safely through, not only because our Shepherd walks with us, but because He has already passed through it and emerged in victory on the other side. We were lost and straying in sin, as sheep so readily do. Our Shepherd, His every thought dedicated to our needs and care, came to find us. He walked headlong into that valley of death, laying down His life on the cross, taking those shadows of death into Himself. He rose from the dead, released from shadows that are only that, shadows, and that no longer have any power over Him — or over us.

Our Good Shepherd anoints His precious sheep with the water and Word in Baptism, as though with a healing oil, and calls each of us by name. Our crucified and risen Shepherd prepares a table for us in the presence of our enemies. Surrounded by the world's evil and violence, and right in Satan's face, our Shepherd serves us His own body and blood, given and shed for the forgiveness of our sins.

Whatever we endure, however threatening the dangers around us, it is not wolves that track us as we walk in our Shepherd's care; His goodness and mercy follow us every day and on into eternity. The promise for the sheep, resting firmly on the death and resurrection of Jesus our Shepherd, is ours, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." The Good Shepherd will, when the time is right, gather us into His sheepfold to live eternally in His presence. Until that great day, we are safe and secure in our Shepherd's care, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand" (JOHN 10:27-28).

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, my Shepherd, You laid down your life to save me. Guide me safely through the threatening shadows that surround me. Nourish my faith with your Word and Holy Supper. Hold me firmly in Your nail-scarred hand and bring me safely into Your eternal presence. Amen.

HYMN

The King of love my shepherd is,
Whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am His
And He is mine forever.

Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,
But yet in love He sought me
And on His shoulder gently laid
And home rejoicing brought me.

And so through all the length of days
Thy goodness faileth never;
Good Shepherd, may I sing Thy praise
Within Thy house forever!

("The King of Love My Shepherd Is," LSB 709, vs. 1, 3, 6)
Tune and Music: Public domain

DEVOTION 32

IN GOD I TRUST

“Be gracious to me, O God, for man tramples on me; all day long an attacker oppresses me; my enemies trample on me all day long, for many attack me proudly.

When I am afraid,

I put my trust in you.

In God, whose word I praise,
in God I trust; I shall not be afraid.
What can flesh do to me?

You have kept count of my tossings;
put my tears in your bottle.

Are they not in your book?

Then my enemies will turn back
in the day when I call.

This I know, that God is for me.

In God, whose word I praise,
in the LORD, whose word I praise,
in God I trust; I shall not be afraid.
What can man do to me?” (Ps. 56:1-4, 8-11).

MANY DISASTERS ARE NATURAL EVENTS LIKE STORMS, flood or wildfires. Other tragedies are man-made yet unintended, as in traffic accidents or carelessly handled fires. Circumstances of war, violence and theft are man-made and intentional, times when we join the psalmist as he pleads for help. Attackers oppress us. Enemies trample us. “I am afraid.”

Yet there is more to be said, “When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.” It is a prayer and a lifelong motto with words to which we cling, as does the psalmist, “In God I trust; I shall not be afraid.” Whether natural or man-made, intentional or accidental, God knows our hurt. He knew our tears before our eyes filled with them, “In your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them” (Ps. 139:16). God is keeping watch and we can be certain that He is on our side. “This I know, that God is for me.”

There is trouble all around us. There are people who want to hurt us; there are people who have hurt us. Is God for us? How do we know? The God we trust, the God whose Word we praise, knows what it is to be trampled and attacked by enemies. Jesus, God in flesh, was betrayed and handed over to His attackers. “What can flesh do to me?” Jesus’ enemies did their worst. He was condemned to death, beaten, ridiculed and nailed up on a cross like a criminal.

From the cross Jesus prayed the words of another psalm, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps. 22:1). Perhaps He prayed the rest of the psalm, with its words of remembered and rightly placed trust, “In you our fathers trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried and were rescued; in you they trusted and were not put to shame” (Ps. 22:4-5).

In love for us, and trusting His heavenly Father, Jesus laid down His life to pay the penalty for sin that we had earned for ourselves. Just as God recorded our days in His book, all that happened to Jesus was written “before the foundation of the world” (1 PETER 1:20) in God’s book of His Son’s days. Although Jesus’ enemies had mocked His trust, “He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!” (Ps. 22:8), God delivered from death the Son in whom He delighted. His book of days recorded the events that occurred only three days later, when Jesus, God’s beloved Son and our Savior, rose from death in triumph.

In Baptism we are united with Jesus. His book of days becomes our book of days. In Him we triumph over our enemies of sin, death and the devil, enemies that Jesus has trampled beneath His feet. In repentant trust, we daily die to sin and rise to new life. Our enemies are turned back. “In God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?”

PRAYER

Almighty God, when I am afraid, I trust in You. I praise Your Word and I know its promises of Your steadfast love. You have recorded all of my days and my tears in Your book. Keep watch over me and bring safely through every attack of my enemies until Your book of my life opens to its final and unending chapter. Hear my prayer for the sake of Jesus, who has written my name in His book of life. Amen.

HYMN

How firm a foundation, O saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!
What more can he say than to you He has said,
Who unto the Savior for refuge have fled?

“Fear not! I am with you, O be not dismayed,
For I am your God and will still give you aid;
I’ll strengthen you, help you, and cause you to stand,
Upheld by My righteous, omnipotent hand.”

“The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose
I will not, I will not, desert to his foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I’ll never, no never, no never, forsake!”

(“How Firm a Foundation,” LSB 728, vs. 1-3)
Tune and Music: Public domain

DEVOTION 33

INTO THE DEPTHS

“Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity
and passing over transgression
for the remnant of his inheritance?

He does not retain his anger forever,
because he delights in steadfast love.

He will again have compassion on us;
he will tread our iniquities underfoot.

You will cast all our sins
into the depths of the sea” (**MICAH 7:18-19**).

WE USUALLY THINK OF DISASTERS AS EVENTS THAT even as they have an impact on our lives, take place outside of ourselves, events such as storms or floods. These frightening events leave terrible destruction behind, but they eventually run their course. Skies clear, rivers recede. But there are tragedies that we experience within ourselves such as our own sin and guilt, our regrets and doubts over our own failures. These personal, inward disasters can continue for a very long time, bringing their own kind of unseen destruction. We can't easily forget them; in fact, we may spend a lot of time revisiting them, “Can God forgive me? Do I deserve to be forgiven? Perhaps I have even brought these outward disasters, the illness or loss, on myself. God must be judging me because of my sin.”

God has judged you for your sin. That judgment was decreed and the penalty carried out some 2000 years ago on a cross outside of Jerusalem. Jesus, God's own Son and our Savior, “bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you are healed” (**1 PETER 2:24**). As the prophet Micah said, God “does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love.” Jesus suffered our place, enduring God's wrath against sin, taking onto Himself the penalty of death for our sins. The debt of sin that you owed, the debt you could never pay, is a debt that God paid, “nailing it to the cross” (**COL. 2:14**). In the forgiveness won by His Son's death and resurrection, He has “cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.” Jesus was condemned and you are declared not guilty. For the sake of Jesus, God has removed your sins so far from His presence it is as if those sins have been thrown into the deepest trench of the ocean, removed forever from His sight. Jesus rose from the dead, defeating sin, death and the devil so that you too will one day rise from death to live in His presence forever. Our Lord said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (**JOHN 5:24**).

Our lives are stained with sin, and we live in a fallen, sin-stained world. When we fail and fall, as we do daily, we need not endlessly rehearse those sins. Through His Spirit and His Word, God turns our hearts to repentance. We hear the forgiveness

spoken in God's Word and receive and taste that forgiveness in Jesus' body and blood, given and shed for us. God has removed your sins from His sight. He does not remember them, and He does not want you to remember them either. God delights in steadfast love, and your sins are gone forever, lost in the ocean depths of His forgiveness.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, during Your earthly ministry, You stilled storms and healed the sick. You made the deaf hear and gave sight to the blind. When I am lost in a disaster of my own making, lost in the darkness of my sin, through the power of Your Spirit restore to me the welcome sight of Your love and forgiveness. Lead me to repentance, and cast my sins far from Your sight. Amen.

HYMN

I lay my sins on Jesus,
The spotless Lamb of God;
He bears them all and frees us
From the accursed load.
I bring my guilt to Jesus
To wash my crimson stains
Clean in His blood most precious
Till not a spot remains.

I lay my wants on Jesus;
All fullness dwells in Him;
He heals all my diseases;
My soul He does redeem.
I lay my griefs on Jesus,
My burdens and my cares;
He from them all releases;
He all my sorrows shares.

(“I Lay My Sins on Jesus,” *LSB 606, vs. 1-2*)
Tune and Music: Public domain

DEVOTION 34

LET THE CHILDREN COME

"And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.' And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them" (MARK 10:13-16).

T MIGHT BE HARD TO IMAGINE ANY FOLLOWER OF JESUS actually trying to keep people away from Jesus, but sometimes His disciples, a little overzealous in their desire to protect their Lord, did just that. The disciples once suggested, after a long day of teaching and healing, that Jesus should send the crowds away hungry (MATT. 14:15). When a woman cried out to Jesus for help, the disciples complained, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us" (MATT. 15:23). The disciples' reaction was not really surprising when they saw parents crowding around Jesus, bringing their children to Him to receive a blessing. "The disciples rebuked them," and tried to keep the children from Jesus.

Children need Jesus. Especially in frightening and uncertain times, they need to know that their Friend and Savior holds them in His arms to bless and protect them. Children may be upset by events they see on the news or stories they overhear as adults discuss current events. How much more terrifying are the storms or earthquakes or violence that touch them personally. At all times, and especially in frightening times, the Savior's littlest lambs need to know their Shepherd cares for them.

Addressing His disciples and all of us, caring and perhaps equally frightened adults, Jesus says, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God." Children need to know that Jesus has promised, "I am with you always," and He always keeps His promises. They are children of the King and they live within His kingdom, surrounded always by His love and power.

Jesus their King knows what it is to be hurt, as His children hurt, because He died on the cross to take away their sins. But Jesus' power is greater than any storm, greater than any evil, greater than death, and He came alive again to guard and guide His children forever. In Jesus, the children of God, of all ages and of every age, have the sure and certain promise of forgiveness for their sins and the guarantee of eternal life in His presence. As the disciple Peter said in his Pentecost sermon, "For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (ACTS 2:39). Jesus calls His children, young and old, to Himself, in days of peace and in days of terror, gathering them safely into His arms to bless them. Jesus is the King whose kingdom belongs even to His littlest subjects. He is the gentle Shepherd who cares for

His lambs as surely as He cares for His adult sheep, "He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young." (IS. 40:11).

PRAYER

Jesus, our Friend and King, as you once welcomed little children into Your presence, surround Your children now, young and old, with Your love and care. Good Shepherd, watch over and protect Your grown sheep and Your youngest lambs and keep us safe in Your loving arms. Amen.

HYMN

I am Jesus' little lamb,
Ever glad at heart I am,
For my Shepherd gently guides me,
Knows my need and well provides me,
Loves me ev'ry day the same,
Even calls me by my name.

Day by day, at home, away,
Jesus is my staff and stay.
When I hunger, Jesus feeds me,
Into pleasant pastures leads me;
When I thirst, He bids me go
Where the quiet waters flow.

("I Am Jesus' Little Lamb." LSB 740, vs. 1-2)
Tune and Music: Public domain

DEVOTION 35

IN CONTROL

"For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
On the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this" (Is. 9:6-7).

WE LIKE TO BE IN CONTROL, AT HOME, AT WORK AND IN MOST SITUATIONS. At least we like to give the appearance of being in control. In illness, our own or that of a family member, in a natural disaster or in terrifying violence, we are no longer in control. It seems as if no one is in control and everything is out of control. We cannot grasp all the events and bring everything under our command.

When circumstances are out of control, it is time to recognize just who is in control, who commands it all; Jesus our Lord, who after His resurrection said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (MATT. 28:18). Jesus' grip on authority was foretold by the prophet Isaiah centuries before the Lord's birth in Bethlehem. This masterful Lord would come among us, not as a powerful, commanding figure, but as a little child, a son. His governing power would increase without end. His throne and kingdom would endure through time and eternity.

The four names given to this all-powerful Son show us who He is and display the extent of His control. He is the Wonderful Counselor, whose wisdom rules over all things. He is the Mighty God who spoke creation into existence and still rules over it. He is the Everlasting Father who cares for the children He has gathered to Himself. This Child, this Son, is our Lord Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. His control is not the overbearing, demanding and threatening rule of an earthly tyrant. He is the Prince of Peace who quieted storms with a word, who banished illness, blindness and commanded even death to release its victims.

Jesus' control, His authority, His peace, came about because He willingly gave up all control. He submitted Himself to the storm of evil that assaulted, and for a time, overcame Him. Jesus, our Prince of Peace, sacrificed Himself for us to pay for our sins, for our desire to wrest control from our Creator. In Christ Jesus, God was reconciling this out of control world to Himself, "making peace by the blood of his cross" (COL. 1:20). Jesus surrendered all control, obedient to His heavenly Father to the

point of death. Raised to life on the third day, Jesus was exalted to a position of authority over all things.

We do need, in trying times, to manage many challenging situations, seeking protection, arranging for rescue and rebuilding. Yet however much we long to be in control, especially in out of control circumstances, it is Jesus our Lord and Savior who is truly in command of the situation. He is the Wonderful Counselor, who gives us the wisdom we need to handle the trouble we face. He is the Mighty God, who quiets the storms of fear within us. He is the Everlasting Father who keeps us, His precious children, close to Himself. Even when you feel as if everything is out of your control, everything is under control beneath the mighty and gentle reign of the Prince of Peace.

PRAYER

Jesus, Prince of Peace, reign in our hearts at all times and especially during frightening and troubling situations we may face. Forgive us when we turn from You to listen to the temptations of the world and follow our own selfish desires. Have mercy on us, and grant to us peace, not control. Amen.

HYMN

To us a Child of hope is born,
To us a Son is giv'n,
And on His shoulder ever rests
All pow'r in earth and heav'n,
All pow'r in earth and heav'n

His name shall be the Prince of peace,
The Everlasting Lord,
The Wonderful, the Counselor,
The God by all adored,
The God by all adored.

Lord Jesus, reign in us, we pray,
And make us Thine alone,
Who with the Father ever art
And Holy Spirit, one,
And Holy Spirit, one.

("The People That in Darkness Sat," LSB 412, vs. 3, 4, 6)
Tune and Music: Public domain

PURE GOLD

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith — more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire — may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (**1 PETER 1:3-9**).

N TROUBLED TIMES WE MAY ASK QUESTIONS LIKE, “Why is this happening to me? Is there a reason for all of this?”

We may never on this side of eternity have the answers we want. The purposes of God are hidden and not for us to know. Yet we do know something of the way in which our heavenly Father works in our lives, “We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (**ROM. 8:28**). In all things, even in circumstances of human evil, God works for good for those who love Him. He did so in the life of Joseph, as the newly appointed ruler of Egypt explained to his once jealous brothers, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.” (**GEN. 50:20-21**). Sold into slavery and unjustly imprisoned, Joseph was raised by God to a position of power and so saved the children of Israel from famine.

Scripture gives us a few other glimpses into the purposes of God as He works in all things to conform us to the image of His Son (**ROM. 8:29**). In times of trial our loving Father “disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness” (**HEB. 12:10**). We “rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (**ROM. 5:2-5**). The troubles that grieve us test and refine our faith, as gold is refined in fire. Such refined and purified faith, more precious than gold, will shine all the brighter as we share in Christ’s glory on the day when our Lord returns.

That precious faith was created within us when we were born again through water and the Spirit, born again to a living hope in a living Lord. Our sins are forgiven and we have the sure and certain promise of eternal life. No suffering, no trouble,

not even death itself can take this inheritance from us. This eternal inheritance is ours because it was won for us by Jesus, who endured trials and suffering for us. He was deserted by His followers and betrayed into the hands of His enemies. He was condemned and crucified, suffering the death penalty for the sins that we commit. Though evil was intended against Him, Jesus was delivered up “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (**ACTS 2:23**). In and through the death and resurrection of our Savior, God was working to save us. Jesus is the source of our imperishable, undefiled and unfading inheritance of eternal life, an inheritance no earthly tragedy can take from us. Jesus is the reason for our living hope.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we may not know the reasons for the trials that You permit to overtake us, but we trust that You will work in them for our good as You have promised. Refine and strengthen our faith so that Your holy name is glorified in our lives as we await the fulfillment of our living hope, the inheritance of eternal life in Jesus’ name. Hear us for the sake of Jesus, who was delivered up to death and raised to life to save us. Amen.

HYMN

All who believe and are baptized
Shall see the Lord’s salvation;
Baptized into the death of Christ,
They are a new creation.
Through Christ’s redemption they shall stand
Among the glorious heav’nly band
Of ev’ry tribe and nation.

With one accord, O God, we pray:
Grant us Your Holy Spirit.
Help us in our infirmity
Through Jesus’ blood and merit.
Grant us to grow in grace each day
That by this sacrament we may
Eternal life inherit.

(“All Who Believe and Are Baptized,” *LSB 601, vs. 1-2*)
Tune and Music: Public domain

FATHER, FORGIVE THEM

"And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (MATT. 6:12-15).

SOMETIMES THE DANGER THAT TOUCHES OUR LIVES IS CAUSED BY NATURE IN STORMS, flood and earthquakes. These disasters come to pass as our world shudders and groans in view of its approaching end (ROM. 8:22). We pray that God would shield us with His power and that our Lord would quickly come. Other disasters we face that are more personal. These are man-made tragedies like intentionally set fires, robbery, violence and terror. There is a face, and perhaps even a known name, behind them.

When there is a human face behind the disaster, known or unknown, how can we forgive the hurt and the damage done? Jesus teaches us to pray as if that difficult task of forgiveness is an accomplished fact, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." The next petitions in the Lord's Prayer support our plea for help in the often wrenching task of forgiveness, a task impossible on our own. Jesus' prayer continues, "Lead us not into temptation." We pray that we will not be tempted to hate or seek revenge. We ask that we not become trapped in loveless thoughts, words and actions, hoping that some evil would befall the one who hurt us or harmed those we love. Do not let us go down that ugly path, we pray, a path that plays right into Satan's plans. What more could our enemy want than to add hurt on hurt and hate on hate? As we continue in prayer, we ask to be rescued from Satan's lies and harm, "Deliver us from evil." We pray to be delivered, not only from great evil done to us, but also to be delivered from the evil of our own selfish desires and loveless thoughts and actions.

In that plea, "Deliver us from evil," we also hear the ultimate answer to that petition, an answer given long ago at the cross. Jesus, who was innocent of all sin, carried the sins of the world in His body to the cross, the sins of those who harmed us and our own sins, including our loveless thoughts and the desire for revenge. Pinned to the cross by nails and by our sins, our innocent Savior prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (LUKE 23:34). His prayer was for those who condemned and crucified Him. His prayer was for us.

That prayer from the cross was answered. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, our heavenly Father has forgiven us. Only in God's forgiveness for us can we forgive others. As we live in repentance for our own sins and receive forgiveness, we find

daily healing in Jesus' wounds, and only in those wounds is the strength to forgive. We may never see or really know the one who caused us harm. Those who nailed Jesus to the cross very likely were not interested in His forgiveness. We do not know if they ever repented, and yet He prayed for them. The forgiveness we offer may take place unseen and unknown, at a distance and in prayer. And if it happens that we cannot yet grant that forgiveness, we pray again that we not be led into temptation, and that Jesus' prayer from the cross for His tormentors would become our own.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. By the power of Your Spirit, through the preaching and teaching of Your Word, touch the lives of those who work evil and seek to harm others. Bring them to repentance so that they too will know the forgiveness won for them on the cross. For the sake of Jesus, whose blood washes us clean from our sins, strengthen us to forgive and make His prayer our own. Amen.

HYMN

My faithful God, You fail me never;
Your promise surely will endure.
O cast me not away forever
If words and deeds become impure.
Have mercy when I come defiled;
Forgive, lift up, restore Your child.

All that I am and love most dearly —
Receive it all, O Lord, from me.
Let me confess my faith sincerely;
Help me Your faithful child to be!
Let nothing that I am or own
Serve any will but Yours alone.

("Baptized into Your Name Most Holy," LSB 590, vs. 3-4)
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REMEMBERING

"I cry aloud to God,
aloud to God, and he will hear me.
In the day of my trouble I seek the LORD;
in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying;
my soul refuses to be comforted.
When I remember God, I moan;
when I meditate, my spirit faints. *Selah*
You hold my eyelids open;
I am so troubled that I cannot speak ...

"Will the LORD spurn forever,
and never again be favorable?
Has his steadfast love forever ceased?
Are his promises at an end for all time?
Has God forgotten to be gracious?
Has he in anger shut up his compassion?" *Selah*
Then I said, 'I will appeal to this,
to the years of the right hand of the Most High.'
I will remember the deeds of the LORD;
yes, I will remember your wonders of old.
I will ponder all your work,
and meditate on your mighty deeds" (Ps. 77:1-4, 7-12).

WE SOMETIMES ENDURE RESTLESS, SLEEPLESS NIGHTS, perhaps replaying frightening, disastrous events and experiences in our minds. This can be an endless loop that we cannot shut down, no matter how hard we try. We spend the night praying, but find no comfort. Like the psalmist, we are so troubled that we cannot speak. We have the same questions asked in the psalm. Is God even listening to our prayers? We have always known the loving God, but now has He somehow forgotten to be loving? We know that He keeps His promises, but recent events leave us wondering, "Are His promises at an end for all time?" More personally, we may even wonder, "Is God angry with me? Is that why I am enduring all of this?"

The inspired psalmist supplies the answer to his own questions, "I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your wonders of old. I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds." The answer to his doubts and sleepless nights is found in God's Word and His works. That is where we, too, will find the answer to our doubts and sleepless nights.

We certainly remember the way things were before the tragedies that distort our lives and disturb our sleep. Life was normal then, and ordinary, and we wish in vain for things to be that way again. But we need to go back far beyond that in order to remember God's "wonders of old." We need to go back to a time before time, before the world was created, because that is when God chose us to be His own, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ ... even as

he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him" (Eph. 1:3-4).

From before creation, our remembering fast forwards to a stable in Bethlehem and then to a cross outside of Jerusalem. God sent His Son to be our Savior. On the cross Jesus laid down His life for us, taking our sins onto Himself and suffering the penalty of death in our place. Then we remember the event just three days later, when the open and empty tomb revealed that Jesus had risen from the dead. Our memories of the past continue forward to the day when God adopted us as His children in Baptism. On that day we were buried with Christ and raised to new life in Him, a life that will continue on into eternity.

"Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious?" His steadfast love has not ceased. He has not forgotten. His promises for us did not end at the baptismal font; they were only beginning. The mighty deeds and wonders of God are displayed for us to find and remember in His Word. And should there be those long and restless nights when we cannot remember His promises, God remembers.

PRAYER

Almighty God, when in restless days and nights of doubt and fear we forget Your works and wonders, turn our hearts and minds to Your Word. Lead us by Your Spirit to remember Your mighty deeds for our salvation. We know, in Christ, that Your promises and Your steadfast love will never end. Hear our prayer in His holy name. Amen.

HYMN

Since Christ has full atonement made
And brought to us salvation,
Each Christian therefore must be glad
And build on this foundation.
Your grace alone, dear Lord, I plead,
Your death is now my life indeed,
For You have paid my ransom.

Let me not doubt, but truly see
Your Word cannot be broken;
Your call rings out, "Come unto Me!"
No falsehood have You spoken.
Baptized into Your precious name,
My faith cannot be put to shame,
And I shall never perish.

("Salvation unto Us Has Come," LSB 555, vs. 6-7)
Tune and Music: Public domain

DEVOTION 39

WHILE THE EARTH REMAINS

“Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, ‘I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease’” (GEN. 8:20-22).

N THE AFTERMATH OF A DEVASTATING STORM OR FLOOD OR FIRE, God’s promise to Noah seems hard to believe. Daily life is turned upside down, property is destroyed, homes, possessions and more terribly, lives, are lost. Nothing will ever be the same again. But even after such destruction, some things will remain unchanged. God’s promise, signaled by His rainbow in clearing skies, is certain, “While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.”

God established the order of the seasons. He set the sun, moon and stars in the sky to “be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years” (GEN. 1:14). In His wrath and judgment against human sin, storms and flood for a time blocked the light and disrupted the pattern of seasons. When the flood waters receded, God promised never again to “strike down every living creature.” Since that time, the orderly progression of the seasons, seedtime and harvest, days and nights, have not ceased. Sadly, as we experience daily within ourselves and in others, human rebellion against the Creator has not ceased either. It is as God observed, “The intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth.” Human sin and evil is reflected onto the created world as it also suffers under the curse of sin. Tragic natural disasters, while they will never again destroy all life on earth, still disrupt and destroy. But God’s promise remains. Creation moves forward as He designed it.

Still, God could not and would not ignore the evil of sin, the willful human rebellion that corrupted His creation and the people created in His image. When, at the appointed time, the ultimate storm of His judgment fell, only one life was struck down to pay the price of sin, and that one life was the life of His own Son. God loves the world He created and sent His Son to take the curse of sin onto Himself, “that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (JOHN 3:16). All of us who trust in Him for salvation have been born anew in Baptism, created anew in Christ. When the time is right, at our Savior’s return, God will renew and restore His creation.

For now seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will not cease; one day these things, as we know them now, will end. When Jesus returns, “The heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be

burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed” (2 PETER 3:10). Anticipating that day, we look forward to “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 PETER 3:13). We don’t know exactly what that new creation will be like, but we know that we will live forever in our Savior’s presence. Nothing will ever be the same again.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, shield us in the many storms and trials that we face. Forgive us when we turn away from You and from Your Word to follow our own desires and the temptations of the world around us. Help us by Your Spirit to live as Your redeemed and renewed people until the day when we live in Your presence forever. Amen.

HYMN

All creatures that have breath and motion,
That throng the earth, the seas, the sky,
Come, share with me my heart’s devotion,
Help me to sing God’s praises high.
My utmost pow’rs can never quite
Declare the wonders of His might.
Creator, humbly I implore You
To listen to my earthly song
Until that day when I adore You,
Together with the angel throng
And learn with choirs of heav’n to sing
Eternal anthems to my King.

(“Oh, That I Had a Thousand Voices,” LSB 811, vs. 4-5)
Tune and Music: Public domain

DEVOTION 40

THE VICTORY

"Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

'Death is swallowed up in victory.'

'O death, where is your victory?'

 O death, where is your sting?'

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 COR. 15:51-58).

SURVIVORS OF A DISASTER MAY EXPRESS THEIR RELIEF AND GRATITUDE even in the face of great loss, "As least we're alive; we're together." But the story does not always end that way. Lives may be lost. Those who are seriously ill do not always recover. We grieve their loss, and that grieving, however painful, is important and necessary. Yet for those of us who trust in Christ our necessary grief differs from that of the unbelieving world. We do not "grieve as others do who have no hope" (1 THESS. 4:13). We have, in the midst of grief, a living hope in our Savior. Even in the midst of sorrow, the Holy Spirit works through the Word to turn our hearts and minds to the promises of God. Those promises lead us to see with eyes of faith the victory that is ours in Jesus.

A brief glimpse of that victory is even found in those well-intended comments suggesting that the person who died is now in a better place. Those comments echo the words of the apostle Paul, who said that he desired to depart and, "be with Christ, for that is far better" (PHIL. 1:23). We know that when we are "away from the body" we are "at home with the Lord" (2 COR. 5:8). Surely there is no better place, but the victory we have in Christ does not end there.

We lay our loved one's body to rest and the departed soul, at home with the Lord, enjoys with all the saints the presence of Jesus. Yet there is more to come, and calling it a better place cannot begin to describe it. On the Last Day when Jesus returns, the bodies of all who have fallen asleep in Him will be raised to life. When Jesus rose from the dead He was no mere vision or spirit. He was real, alive and physically present with them. The risen Lord ate with His disciples; He invited them to touch the scars left by His crucifixion. Our bodies, too, will one day be raised and glorified, for, "when Christ who is your life appears,

then you also will appear with him in glory" (COL. 3:4). On that day, death itself will be destroyed. Death with die! Soul and body reunited, we will live forever in a creation made new, where "we will always be with the Lord" (1 THESS. 4:17). There will be no storms or disaster, no loss or pain, no grief or tears.

For now we grieve, but we grieve as people who have living hope, confident that those who have fallen asleep in Christ will rise with us to share forever the victory that is ours through faith in His name. Our risen and reigning Lord tells us, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades" (REV. 1:17-18). Death does not have the last word, not now, not ever. Jesus does.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, when we are frightened in the face of death, when we grieve the loss of those we love, turn our hearts to Your Word to find in You the promise of life and resurrection. We look forward to the day of Your return when we will be raised from our graves to live in Your presence forever. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

HYMN

Jesus lives! The vict'ry's won!
 Death no longer can appall me;
Jesus lives! Death's reign is done!
 From the grave Christ will recall me.
Brighter scenes will then commence;
This shall be my confidence.

Jesus lives! And now is death
 But the gate of life immortal;
This shall calm my trembling breath
 When I pass its gloomy portal.
Faith shall cry, as fails each sense:
Jesus is my confidence!

("Jesus Lives! The Vict'ry's Won," LSB 490, vs. 1, 5)
Tune and Music: Public domain

PRAYERS

IN TIME OF DISASTER

Have mercy, most merciful Lord, on all those who suffer in this time of disaster. In Your mercy and according to Your will, supply their physical needs, give them hope and comfort in the midst of their distress, and grant them faith in the One who suffered for us, Jesus Christ. Guide, equip and strengthen all who work to bring healing and relief. Swiftly restore civil order and peace. Use this time and these events to humble us before You, to lead us to repent of our sin, and to seek Your mercy and love, which never fails; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

AFTER A CATASTROPHE

Heavenly Father, forgive us when we turn from You and rebel against Your Word and will. Have mercy on us for the sake of Jesus our Savior, who lifted the weight of sin and guilt from us and carried that terrible burden in His own body to the cross. When our attention becomes fixed only on the troubles we see before us, turn our hearts to the glory that is unseen, the glory won for us through Jesus' death and resurrection. Comfort us now in our afflictions and train us by your Spirit to bear the weight of eternal glory that will be ours through faith in Jesus' name. Amen.

FOLLOWING AN ACT OF TERRORISM OR PERSECUTION

Holy Father, God of mercy, God of comfort, as the darkness grows and hatred and violence seem to triumph in this world, embrace in Your tender compassion all who suffer from this latest terror attack. Remember all who have lost loved ones, and the many who are injured and dying. Grant to them Your mercy, Your healing, Your peace. We remember that in Your Son You have given to us the Love that no hatred can overcome, the Life that no death can destroy, the Forgiveness that exceeds all the violence that fallen humanity inflicts upon itself. Make Your Church a firm witness to this unfailing hope. We pray these things in the saving name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

FOR THE POLICE

Kind Father, to your loving protection we commend all who work to keep our communities safe. We grieve for the tensions that have grown among us that put our police and sheriffs in such danger. Crush the plans of those who seek to bring harm to others. Give the comfort You alone can give to those who grieve their dead. Remember all who walk in harm's way because they don a uniform, and yet continue to do so to protect the lives and property of others. May Your holy angels go with them and guard them in their work. May they ever remember that they serve a noble office, carrying out their duties with honor and a good conscience. We ask these things in the name of Him who knew in His flesh the violence and wounds that hatred inflicts, and yet whose love was stronger than death, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

AS WE MOURN THOSE WHO HAVE DIED

Dearest Father, death has robbed us of those we love. Your promise of the resurrection gives us hope but our hearts feel torn and our spirits feel empty as the dearest memories now bring the deepest pain. We need Your peace. Give us the strength that sustained You in the death of Your only Son that we may have strength in our days, purpose in our calling and comfort in our afflictions. Gather our loved ones into Your arms that we may be reunited one day, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son. Amen.

ONGOING STRESS

Heavenly Father, when I am trapped in anxiety and fears for the future, comfort me and strengthen my faith through the hope and peace found in Your Holy Word. Turn my attention to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, where I see evidence of Your care for all of creation. Through Christ my Savior You have delivered me from sin and death and have brought me safely into His eternal kingdom. You know my needs and you will provide for me, now and for eternity. Hear my prayers in Jesus' name. Amen.

FOR COMFORT

Dearest Jesus, during these days we may feel like no one understands our needs, anxieties or heartache. Only you know the depths into which we have plunged; only You can reach us, sustain us and lift us up. We pray that you, who forsook comfort for the cross, would not forsake us but would gather us to Yourself and hold us fast, that we may know Your lasting comfort and peace. Amen.

FOR STRENGTH

Lord Jesus, You came to earth as a helpless child, setting aside the fullness of Your power to redeem frail humanity. You know the weakness of our mortal flesh through Your own suffering and death. Our afflictions drain us of energy and empty us of enthusiasm. According to Your Word, perfect Your power in our weakness, support us in Your mighty arms and grant us strength to follow where You lead and to live according to Your Father's will; for You live and reign with Him and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

FOR PROTECTION FROM DESPAIR

Heavenly Father, God of hope, protect me from all thoughts of hopelessness and despair. So much has gone wrong and help seems so far off. Open my eyes to always see Your never failing love in Jesus Christ. Please place before our eyes the never-failing love of Jesus, which we see in His suffering and death on the cross in our place. Allow us to always remember that You love us beyond measure. In every darkness and difficulty, help us to trust You and Your promises, so that we may live in hope. Amen.

PRAYERS

CALLED TO SUFFERING

Lord Jesus Christ, You have promised that You would not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear. Right now, we are suffering greatly, we have lost much and our lives seem turned upside down. It is hard to see any good that may come out of this. But allow us to know that You have called us to endure this pain and that You truly will not allow us to be left alone, You will not allow us to fall into despair. Give us strength right now to endure what we are facing, fulfill Your promise before us and before our eyes that You truly will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear but, through Your Son Jesus, Who will always provide the right measure of comfort, strength and consolation during these days. Amen.

LOSS OF HOME

O Lord, my house in this world is gone. Gone is the earthly roof over my head, gone are the walls that protected me, surrounded me and gave me security. Gone are all the possessions and reminders of my past. I ache knowing that I have been uprooted and thrown about so greatly. Grant me shelter for my physical body. Comfort me by Your dear Son Jesus that my confidence may rest in the shelter He is for me. Allow me to find peace, knowing that You are my eternal dwelling place, You are my mansion prepared for me in heaven. If it be Your will, let my home be rebuilt and in all things, allow me to be content. Amen.

FOR LOSS OF DAILY WORK

O Lord, You find pleasure in our labors. Ever since creation You blessed the work of our hands and the sweat of our brow. Be with us as we struggle with unemployment, financial worries and the loss of purpose in our life. We pray that You would restore all of us speedily to gainful employment so that we may honor You through our vocations. Until then, do not allow false pride to prevent us from accepting the assistance and generosity of others. Through this receiving, allow us to see what it means to truly rely upon You for all things. Amen.

FOR CHILDREN

Jesus, our Friend and Kin, as you once welcomed little children into Your presence, surround Your children now, young and old, with Your love and care. Good Shepherd, watch over and protect Your grown sheep and Your youngest lambs and keep us safe in Your loving arms. Amen.

Additional resources may be found in the *Pastoral Care Companion* (CPH, 2007), *Lutheran Service Book: Agenda* (CPH, 2006) and at lcms.org/disaster.

RELIEF ORGANIZATIONS

LCMS AFFILIATED DISASTER RELIEF ORGANIZATIONS

Camp Courage: lcms.org/disaster

A VBS-style ministry to children whose community has been affected by a disaster or tragedy

Camp Restore: camprestore.org

Specializes in volunteer coordination

Disaster Care Ministry: bslc.360unite.com/disaster-care-ministry

Flood buckets and general disaster relief

District Offices of the LCMS: lcms.org/districts

Contact your district office to connect with your district disaster coordinator and/or Lutheran social-service organization

Holy Cow Smokers: log.org/connect/hcs

Provides food after a tragedy

Lutheran Church Charities: lutheranchurchcharities.org

Primarily focuses on comfort dogs, flood response and chainsaw teams

LCMS Disaster Response: lcms.org/disaster

Offers an extensive variety of materials, training, response, coordination and support to LCMS districts and congregations after a tragedy

LCMS Recognized Service Organizations: lcms.org/rso

Check to see if there is an LCMS RSO in your area that can help

Orphan Grain Train: ogt.org

Focuses on transportation of donated goods and portable disaster-relief facilities

Peace Officer Ministries: peaceofficerministries.org

Provides chaplaincy ministry to police and first responders after a tragedy

Shepherd's Heart Disaster Response Ministry:

facebook.com/ShepherdsHeartMinistry

Focuses on tree removal after hurricanes and tornadoes

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod: locator.lcms.org

Your local Lutheran congregation is an excellent place to find spiritual care and compassion after a tragedy



THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

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