

MARCH 2020

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FORWARD IN CHRIST

A LUTHERAN VOICE



A REMINDER OF
GOD'S GRACE
AND LOVE

WELS BIBLE
CAMPS

p. 4

LENT MEANS
LOVE

p. 10

WHEN I
FEEL ALONE

p. 12



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May the LORD our God be with us as he was with our ancestors;
may he never leave us nor forsake us. — 1 KINGS 8:57

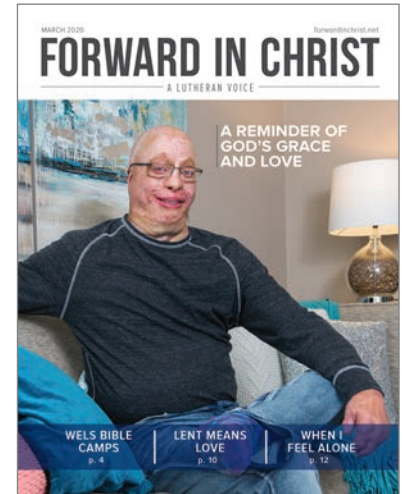
WHAT'S INSIDE

I met Spencer Beach at the synod convention in New Ulm last summer. As he told me his story, his strong faith, sense of humor, and complete openness touched me. It wasn't until I was halfway through writing his story when it struck me how much it reminded me of Job's. Read it on p. 18.

In the interview, Spencer and I talked quite a bit about the question, Why me, God? How fitting that our "Please explain" column this month addresses a question that often follows: Whom do we blame for bad things? (p. 26).

God's grace and love were also highlighted in our interview. While Spencer talked about how he saw that grace and love directly in his life, God's love for all sinners is perhaps most evident during the season of Lent. There we see how much Jesus loved us through his perfect life and his innocent suffering and death on the cross. In this issue, Stephen Helwig reviews the temptation of Jesus and reminds us of Jesus' sinless sacrifice (p. 28) and what that means to us today. Mark Tiefel looks at the reasons we should fall in love with Lent again and the importance of reflecting Jesus' love in our lives (p. 10).

Julie Wietzke



COVER PHOTO | Courtesy of Spencer Beach

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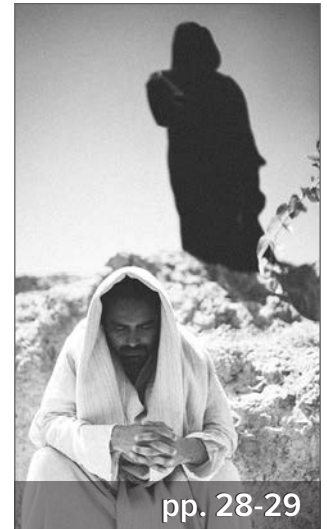
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THIS IS WELS

WELS churches hold Bible camps to share God's Word with the children in their congregations as well as with those in the community. These camps target a variety of interests, including sports, science, adventure, art, and more.

1 | Trinity, Crete, Ill. 2 | Goodview Trinity, Goodview, Minn. 3 | Cross of Life, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada 4 | St. Andrew, Middleton, Wis. 5 | Good Shepherd, Sioux Falls, S.D. 6 | Faith, Anchorage, Alaska

7 | Grace, Falls Church, Va. 8 | Sure Foundation, Woodside, Queens, N.Y. 9 | Christ, Pewaukee, Wis. 10 | Grace, Prairie du Chien, Wis.

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7



8



9



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Jesus' last will and testament

“And he took bread, . . . saying, ‘This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ . . . He took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you’ ” (Luke 22:19,20).

Daniel J. Habben

THERE ONCE WAS A Portuguese aristocrat who picked his “heirs” out of a phone book. When he died, Luis da Camara’s estate bestowed \$2,000 each to 70 astonished people who had never heard of da Camara before.

Maybe you’ve already calculated what you could do with that chunk of change. We’re quick to recognize the value of money and the doors it opens!

We’re not always so quick to cherish the shockingly valuable inheritance that we’ve already received. We claim this inheritance every time we receive Holy Communion, our heavenly Brother’s last will and testament. Instead of fantasizing about what we could do with someone else’s \$2,000 windfall, let’s spend a few precious moments dwelling on the doors that are opened by this very real inheritance of grace.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INHERITANCE

The first Holy Communion took place the night before Jesus’ death, when he and his disciples were celebrating the Passover. Historically, the Passover was the last meal the Israelites ate before they escaped Egyptian enslavement. God designed the menu, which included unleavened bread and roasted lamb.

The bread without yeast was both practical and symbolic. It was practical because the Israelites were booking it out of Egypt like a business person rushing to catch the last plane home. They didn’t have time to wait for dough to rise before baking it. But the unleavened bread was also a symbol God used to impress on his people. Just as no yeast “contaminated” their bread that night, so no sin was to contaminate their lips, hands, or hearts.

Impossible! That flat piece of unleavened bread might as well have been a miniature stone tablet of the Ten Commandments. It upheld an ideal the Israelites couldn’t reach.

That’s why God included roasted lamb on the Passover menu. This was the lamb whose blood was painted on the Israelite doorposts in Egypt. Like a bright red “Do Not Enter” sign, those bloody brushstrokes signaled to the angel of death that he should pass over the home and not claim the firstborn child who lived there.

As the disciples ate the Passover meal the night before Jesus’ crucifixion, they would have been reminded of



PHOTO | iStock

Jesus made out his will and named us sinners his beneficiaries.

these truths: God’s desire for them to be pure and God’s bloody plan to save them from their impurity.

AN INHERITANCE THAT MATTERS

And now, his salvation plan was about to be fulfilled. Jesus would soon paint his blood on the cross, and that “doorpost” would shield the world from God’s judgment.

So, Jesus took bread and wine and pronounced them to also be his body and blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Thorns, nails, and cross loomed large on the night he instituted Holy Communion, but Jesus still thought about you and me. Jesus made out his will and named us sinners his beneficiaries.

Many of the people who made it into da Camara’s will thought it was a practical joke. It’s also easy to think that a summons to Holy Communion is a bit of a joke. A bite of bread and a sip of wine—it doesn’t seem like much. But with the bread and wine of Holy Communion, you’ll also receive Jesus’ body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. It’s an inheritance that opens the only door that matters: the door to heaven.



Contributing editor Daniel Habben is pastor at St. John, Saint John, Antigua.

What's love got to do with it?

From time to time I receive questions about why our synod puts a particular doctrine into practice the way we do. I had such a question recently about closed (or sometimes called “close”) Communion. The questioner asked, “Who are we to deny the Lord’s Supper to someone who desires it?”

In keeping with what Scripture says, we believe and teach that we should participate in the Lord’s Supper only with those who confess the same beliefs that we do. It’s called “closed” Communion because it is not open to everyone. It’s sometimes called “close” Communion because it is a public expression of our common faith with those who participate with us.

First, we should be clear what we are *not* saying by practicing closed Communion. Practicing closed Communion does not mean that we are questioning whether someone outside of our fellowship is a Christian or has faith in Christ. People who belong to false-teaching churches can have saving faith despite the false doctrine taught in those churches. Practicing closed Communion does not mean that we believe that we are somehow better than other people, as if we deserve to receive the Lord’s Supper and they do not. Practicing closed Communion does not mean that we are claiming to read what is in someone’s heart. Rather, we take people at their word. We recognize that membership in a church that has departed from the truth of Scripture is a public profession that a person accepts the false teachings of that church.

So, why do we practice closed Communion? The answer is simple: love.

Our love for the Word of God leads us to do all we can to avoid any activity that would compromise his truth. The reception of Communion is a public act that demonstrates a oneness or unity of faith and belief in the doctrines of Scripture.

Our love for Christians who have some false beliefs compels us to point out those errors. Joining in Communion with someone who holds false beliefs sends a message that doctrinal error and false beliefs are not important and can be overlooked. It encourages them in these false beliefs.

Our love for people outside of our fellowship—possibly members of churches that deny the real presence—leads us not to participate with them in something that might harm them spiritually.

Scripture also teaches that for the Lord’s Supper to be spiritually beneficial, a person needs to be able to “examine” oneself. That is possible only when someone has been fully instructed in the Christian faith. Such instruction enables a person to sincerely confess one’s sinfulness and to recognize that Jesus is really present in the Lord’s Supper, giving us his true body and blood.

Finally, our love and concern for our own faith lead us to want to avoid false teaching and those who adhere to it and not join with them in receiving the Sacrament. Minimizing or overlooking false teaching as if there is nothing to be concerned about would place our own faith in danger.

Maybe instead the question should be, “Why would WELS want to do anything that compromises the truth of God’s Word and potentially causes spiritual harm to other Christians?”

The answer is love. What’s love got to do with closed Communion? Everything!



Mark G. Schroeder | WELS President



PHOTO | Mel Anne Designs



CONFESSIONS *of faith*

The Holy Spirit used individuals, life circumstances, and a yearning for clarity to draw three friends around God's Word. | Rachel Hartman

PHOTO | Lightstock

MORE THAN 20 YEARS AGO, Holly Vaden and Anna Thorson became friends while working at a hospital in Grand Forks, North Dakota. The friendship was an unlikely one. They had contrasting lifestyles. Anna and her husband, Hal, regularly attended a Lutheran church in their hometown, while Holly lived a secular life without a church.

Holly moved out of the area but periodically continued to visit Hal and Anna at their ranch in North Dakota. Whenever she stayed, Hal and Anna encouraged her to come to church with them. She went a couple of times but chose to wait at the ranch after that while they went to the service. At the time, Holly viewed church as a manmade contrivance and the Bible as a collection of stories designed to exemplify a moral life. She didn't want anything to do with it.

Years later, Holly arrived at Hal and Anna's doorstep holding a Bible and a Bible information booklet. She had recently been confirmed at a WELS church in Arizona where she was living and was excited to share her faith. Moreover, she invited Hal and Anna to join her in attending a WELS church in their area.

DEVELOPING A SET OF BELIEFS

When she was a child, Holly's family had some ties to a Lutheran church. Holly was baptized in 1959 on Easter Sunday in a Slovak Synod

Lutheran Church located in upstate New York, where her godparents lived. For the next five years, the family attended church regularly. After that, her family moved to a different part of the country and went to church less frequently. For some time, they only attended on Christmas and Easter.

I feel that God has guided our paths all along.

Through her childhood friends, Holly was introduced to a variety of beliefs, including Mormonism, Catholicism, and Seventh-day Adventism. Around the age of 20, she became friends with a member of the Nazarene church. The friend invited Holly to attend church with her, which Holly did on a few occasions. "It wasn't that I didn't believe that there was a God, because I did," Holly says. "On occasion I would pray to him. And when the sun was shining through the clouds of rain, I felt that God was smiling down on the planet."

God continued to place Christians like Hal and Anna in Holly's path. "However, I had formulated my own hodgepodge faith consisting of reincarnation, the idea that all people are basically good, and that eventually a person will achieve a oneness with God," Holly says. Her focus became the interconnectedness of all things in nature. She wondered why people



would spend time in a church building when they could be with God in the great outdoors.

A JOURNEY TO THE TRUTH

On a rainy afternoon in 2016, Holly had to euthanize her beloved horse of 26 years. She was living in the Tucson, Arizona, area at the time, and a vet came to the corral to put down the horse. He explained most horses will struggle—sometimes violently—to get back on their feet once they are down. Just before the vet gave the lethal injection, the rain dissolved, and sunlight came streaming through the clouds. The sun's beams shone directly on Holly, the vet, and the horse in the corral. "I thought it was God smiling," Holly says. Her horse went slowly down on his side and quietly died without any struggle. Neither Holly nor the vet had ever seen a horse go so peacefully. "It was a very moving experience," Holly recalls.

During the following three weeks, Holly felt a great urge to go to church. She found a Lutheran church nearby. As she sat and looked around, she recalled the church of her childhood. She was filled with a sense of coming home, so much so that she was overcome with tears.

Over the course of the next year, Holly visited an array of churches throughout Tucson. She felt she gleaned a little out of each experience, but there was something about the sermons she heard from a young pastor at Grace, Tucson, that really struck her. After an early morning service in 2017 Holly asked the pastor how she could become a member. He steered her to the Bible information class called "Grow in Grace."

SHARING THE MESSAGE

Holly took some time studying the Bible before sharing her newfound faith with her longtime Christian friend Anna. "I wanted to make sure I was on the right path," Holly says. When Holly eventually told Anna she had decided to be confirmed, Anna was encouraging. She told Holly she would come for the confirmation. Six

Talking ABOUT YOUR FAITH

God reminds us in his Word that the Holy Spirit works faith and that he uses us as his instruments to bring others closer to him. Looking back on her journey of faith, Holly says, "It seems like God was continually placing people of faith into my life." They shared the gospel.

When talking about your faith to others, keep in mind:

- God can use the seed of the gospel in your conversation to draw others to Jesus.
- The person may want to learn more, now or in the future.
- You can pray for that person after your conversation.
- You may not see immediate results, but remember that you have planted a seed.
- The Holy Spirit will bless your efforts.

months later, in November 2017, Anna witnessed the promised confirmation. "It was a special moment for both of us," Holly says.

Anna and Hal had attended a church in a town near their ranch in North Dakota for years. Both had been churchgoers their entire lives, but they wondered if there was something else to learn. "Hal and I knew we were not being 'fed' by our church," Anna says. They felt an emptiness in what the church was teaching and didn't see opportunities to learn more about the Bible.

"We saw the changes in Holly and how the Holy Spirit was transforming her," Anna shares. "She was so excited about her faith. That was something we were missing."

When Anna invited Holly to the ranch in the fall of 2017, Holly showed up with her "Grow in Grace" book and Bible in hand. "I knew Anna and Hal had been frustrated," she says. Holly asked Anna and Hal if they wanted to join her in attending a WELS church.

The nearest congregation was in Minot, an hour away, but the trio set off for a Sunday service. The message struck Hal and Anna as one they had been looking for: an explanation of sin, forgiveness, and grace through Jesus' death and resurrection. The couple soon started attending more and taking membership classes.

The Bible studies were insightful for both Hal and Anna. "It's inspiring to study together and grow as a group," Anna says. "We felt we found other people with the same hunger to learn more," adds Hal. The two became members on May 20, 2018, a day that coincided with their 35th wedding anniversary.

SISTERS IN CHRIST

Looking back on their friendship, both Anna and Holly are thankful for the way the Holy Spirit led them throughout the years. When they first met, "Holly and I were opposite in most every way," Anna recalls. "My husband never understood why we were friends." Perhaps it was that opposites attract.

Now it's different in a way. The two friends are WELS members, and the bond has grown even more. "Our friendship has gone to a new level," Anna explains. "When we get together, we attend Bible studies, read Scripture, and talk about how God has shown himself in our lives. I feel that God has guided our paths all along. Praise be to him alone!"



Rachel Hartman is a member at Divine Savior, Doral, Florida.

WHAT SETS WELS *apart*

"We both attended church our entire lives. For many years we had a hunger for the truth. We knew there was more, but we could not grasp what we were unaware of. While attending new member classes at Grace, we found what we were missing. We became aware of how sinful we are and how much we need a Savior. Since joining Grace, we have become spiritually alive, feasting on God's Word and truth!" say Hal and Anna.

While those seeking a church have many options, they'll find recurring themes in whatever WELS church they attend:

- A message of sin and grace (as mentioned in Hal and Anna's quote).
- A commitment to hold Scripture as the authority, above human thought and other sources.
- A fellowship that believers share, as they focus on their journey together toward heaven.
- The preaching of the Word in its truth and purity.



Anna and Holly (right)

LENT *means* LOVE

Lenten Bible readings and hymns remind us of God's love and our opportunity to reflect that love.

Mark W. Tiefel

Each year, as winter yields to spring and as February turns into March, most people are ready for a change in the seasons. Especially in the north we are eager to put colder, harsher days behind us as we look forward to brighter and more cheerful days to come. Perhaps that's why those who follow the church's calendar might struggle with the season of Lent.

Between the bright and joyful celebrations of Epiphany and Easter, the Christian church seems to trudge its way through the 40-day journey of Lent. The journey is often marked by messages of abstinence and sacrifice and is accompanied by slow and somber hymns. For many, Lent can carry persistent feelings of guilt. We spend twice as much time in church, singing hymns that seem to take twice as long to sing. We re-examine a brutal story of suffering as we go through the Passion History.

Like the Filet-O-Fish® sandwich on the McDonald's menu every March, everyone knows what Lent is, but no one seems to like it much. Of all the seasons, Lent seems to be the

one that Lutherans love to loathe. Words like *love* and *Lent* don't seem to fit together.

But when we look closer, we find plenty of reasons that Lent is all about love.

LOVE CONQUERS ALL

The season, which starts on Ash Wednesday, begins a 40-day journey ending on Easter. The six Sundays in Lent, which aren't counted in the 40-day figure, provide powerful pictures of Jesus at work. In each of them, we see the Savior waging war against all those who were opposed to him and against everything that might threaten our faith. He battles the devil and his temptations (Matthew 4:1-11; see also pp. 28,29), the Pharisees and their man-made rules (John 9:1-39), and even his own disciples when they didn't understand the cross (Mark 8:31-38).

At the same time, we see our Savior fighting for people. He defeats the doubts of Nicodemus (John 3:1-17), the fears of the woman at the well (John 4:5-26), and the spiritual blindness of the human heart (John 9:1-39).

What drives him to do such things? Love! Love for his Father and his Word, love for his followers and their faith, love for all. Love leads Jesus to weep at the grave of Lazarus just

PHOTO | Lightstock

before he overcomes the power of death (John 11:17-27,38-45). Love leads Jesus to lament over Jerusalem as he rides through the city, prepared to die for those who did not love him (Luke 20:9-19).

By the time Christians reach the end of Lent, we have not only witnessed Jesus' battles but also his bitter suffering. Many churches make use of midweek devotions to recount the Passion History. As we are reminded of the unjust brutality, what do we see at the heart of the story?

In one sense, Jesus' "passion" relates to what he "suffered" (in Latin, *passio* means "to suffer or endure"). But in a greater sense, what we witness at the end of Lent is the compassionate love of Christ on full display. Lenten hymns and hymn writers love to make the connection: "What Wondrous Love Is This" (*Christian Worship* [CW] 120). Samuel Crossman's poem calls us to consider it: "My song is love unknown, my Savior's love to me, love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be" (CW 110:1). Paul Gerhard puts the truth in concrete terms: "Your cords of love, my Savior, bind me to you forever; I am no longer mine" (CW 113:5), and in the third stanza of their hymn "O Church Arise," Keith and Kristyn Getty summarize the connection in the simplest, most straightforward terms: "Come, see the cross, where love and mercy meet."

Each spring, while the world imagines a sentimental Valentine's kind of love, Lent teaches the truths of God's sacrificial and redeeming love in Jesus. "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:9,10).

LOVE CHANGES LIVES

During Lent, Christians witness the love of the Savior. They also have a unique opportunity to reflect that love in their relationships with God and their neighbor. As Isaac Watts put it, "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all" (CW 125:4). The personal application of Lent's lessons was a driving force behind many of the customs and habits associated with the season.

From early on, the observance of the Lenten season focused on self-examination, self-denial, and self-reflection. Lent was used by the early Christian church as an intensive study session for catechism

the spiritual reasons for them were long forgotten. While many people learned to observe Lent, they certainly didn't learn to love it!

Is it possible for us to fall in love with Lent again? Only by returning to the heart of the message will we regain the meaning of Lent. This is what we discover in a season of repentance. As we hear God's message of pardon and absolution set forth in the gospel of our Savior, we also hear his call to continually grow in repentance and faith: "Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us" (1 John 4:11,12).

OUR 40-DAY JOURNEY THIS LENT

A TIME FOR REPENTANCE:



Think seriously about sin and spend time seeing it solved at the foot of Jesus' cross.

A TIME FOR RECONCILIATION:



Speak to your fellow family members and serve fellow members of your congregation.

A TIME FOR REFLECTION:



Consider the unique vocation that God has given you as a spouse, a parent, a teacher, a pastor, or a friend.

A TIME FOR RENEWAL:



Read Luther's catechisms or journal in the margins of your Bible or hymnal. It will be 40 days well spent.

students. Often Christians paired spiritual discipline with physical discipline. They imitated Jesus' wilderness fasting with selective fasting of their own.

But over time, good habits became bad habits, as people focused on what and when they could eat instead of why they were choosing not to eat. Abstaining from sweets or alcohol, Wednesday soup suppers, Friday fish fries—even the famous McDonald's sandwich—all owed their existence to Lent, even when

What originally started as a Prairie Home punchline might actually serve us this season: "When you're Lutheran, it's always Lent." Perhaps it's a season that we learn to love. The stories are serious, and the hymns may be somber, but in Lent we see and share the love of God in Christ.



Mark Tiefel is pastor at Emmanuel, New London, Wisconsin.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

PHOTO | Lightstock

When you feel at the bottom with nowhere to go, turn to the Lord. | Emmilee S. Hillier

EMPTY. FORGOTTEN. Worthless. Defeated. Hopeless. Alone.

I feel all these things when I'm lying awake at night wondering why. Why am I even here? Why am I still alive? I wonder if death would be the best option.

I'll put on that fake smile every morning, so people don't ask questions and assume that nothing is wrong. I wear it as a mask to hide who I really am and what I'm really feeling. I feel alone. I feel like I'm the only person in the world that I can have a real conversation with, because I feel like I'm the only one who will ever truly understand what is going on in my mind. No one else knows what it feels like to feel completely broken and as fragile as a piece of thin glass. Nobody knows.

Or so I thought.

I have found several people who are going through the same thing as me. They felt the same feelings of emptiness, being forgotten, worthlessness, being defeated, hopelessness, and above all, loneliness. Depression is something that happens a lot. But God's Word has really helped me through my struggle to overcome my depression. I have always tried to turn to the Bible for help in my times of need.

When these feelings come on me, I have a couple of passages that I turn to. The very first passage I think of is, " 'I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future' " (Jeremiah 29:11). This verse has given

me so much comfort when I'm feeling depressed or alone. It reminds me that my life is in God's hands and that I should never worry or stress about the future because God has a plan for me. For you too! This passage has so much meaning to me and has helped me through so much that I felt that it would be an insult not to choose it for my confirmation verse. It was a no-brainer.

Another passage that I turn to when I'm having some of my worst days is, "The LORD is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. The righteous person may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all" (Psalm 34:18,19). This is such a heartwarming passage for anyone, not just people who are suffering

from depression. This passage has lifted me up and brought me to a better place when I was almost to the point of no return.

I never felt comfortable talking to people about my feelings. I'm still not. In fact, I hate it more than anything, so the Bible is something that is very easy for me to turn to.

So, if you're ever feeling empty, forgotten, worthless, defeated, hopeless, or alone, just remember that there are people out there who know what you are feeling. They can help you. There are people

who love you, and they are there for you. Most of all, God is there for you. He will never leave you, and he will never let you fall.

If you are feeling depressed and think that the only way out is by dying, please go seek help for yourself. There are people who can help. There is still hope.

You are not alone.



Emmilee Hillier, a junior at Lakeside Lutheran High School, Lake Mills, Wisconsin, is a member at Peace, Sun Prairie, Wisconsin.

Helping your teen

Did you know that 1 in 5 young adults live with a mental health condition? Dan Nommensen and Sheryl Cowling, counselors from Christian Family Solutions, offer tips to help parents when they discover that their teen is struggling:



STAY CALM. Teens will shut down if they think their parents or other adults can't handle what they're hearing.



BE HONEST. Tell your teen you don't have all of the answers all of the time, but you're willing to learn.



ACCEPT that your teen will make mistakes. Remind them frequently of Christ's unconditional forgiveness.



PRAY with your teen & tell them that you love them.



BE NURTURED together through the Word. Text your teen a Scripture passage or a link to a short devotion.



LISTEN! Really listen. Without distraction, without judgment, without rushing in with a potential solution.



BRAINSTORM. Weigh pros and cons. Discuss what they think is a solution, even if you have a different opinion.



TRUST your gut. If your teen is depressed or anxious—and not just for a brief time—seek professional help.

Need help? Contact Christian Family Solutions at 800-438-1772.

HIGHLIGHTING TEEN MENTAL HEALTH

To help raise awareness and funds for teen mental health, Lakeside Lutheran High School, Lake Mills, Wis., recently hosted "Tosses for Teens," a cornhole tournament fundraiser.

"Mental health is something that affects so many people, especially in high school," says Ryann Burger, a senior at Lakeside and one of the student coordinators of the tournament. "We chose it because many people who struggle with mental illness believe that they are alone and do not realize how many people are like them. Letting these people know they are not alone and there are others who want to help is so important."

As part of the event, members of the National Honor Society put together a video to create awareness for mental health needs in students.

The tournament raised \$3,600, which was given to Christian Family Solutions to support its Member Assistance Program. Through this program, Christian Family Solutions offers up to five free sessions of Christian counseling to teens who are struggling with issues such as anxiety and depression. Meetings often take place via a secure video program.

Christian Family Solutions provides this opportunity to qualifying students in all of the area Lutheran high schools and the synod's two preparatory schools. Dan Nommensen, director of the program, says that Christian Family Solutions worked with hundreds of students last fall.

"I knew there were always people who struggled with anxiety, but I never knew how many really do," says Burger. "This whole event really opened my eyes to what I can do for other people who maybe just need a friend."

LEARN MORE AT christianfamilysolutions.org about the Member Assistance Program. View the Lakeside mental health awareness video at forwardinchrist.net/you-are-not-alone.



WITH DAVID SCHARF



The God of the Old Testament wiped out the world with a flood, sent plagues on the Egyptians, and commanded his people to kill the Canaanites. He revealed himself only to the Jews. In the New Testament, we are told that God is a God of love and that his followers were to go into all the world to tell others of his love. How can we say that the God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of the New Testament?

TWO DIFFERENT GODS?

There is a caricature that the God of the Bible in the Old Testament was all law and fury and in the New Testament all gospel and warm fuzzies. As a result, some believe that God has grown softer on sin since Jesus came into the world.

That thought would be a hard sell for some in the New Testament. Try telling Ananias and Sapphira, both of whom fell dead at Peter's feet for their deception, that God is soft on sin (Acts 5:1-11). Or tell it to King Herod, who was struck down for his pride (Acts 12:21-23). The New Testament gives ample evidence of God's justice.

Also the Old Testament is not all law and fury. Some of the most beautiful gospel promises come from the Old Testament:

- "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Jeremiah 31:34).
- "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12).

Simply, we do not see two different Gods in the Old Testament and the New Testament.

OUR GOD IS JUST

Our God does not change. James 1:17 says, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows."

You may be asking, "Then why doesn't he judge sin today? Isn't he tolerating sin by not judging it?" The apostle Paul wrote to the congregation at

Rome who seemed to have the same question: "Because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgement will be revealed" (Romans 2:5). We risk looking at God's patient grace and confusing it for tolerance. The people in Noah's day did the same thing when Noah preached for 120 years about an impending flood, but no rain was seen. God is just.

OUR GOD IS PATIENT

Then why doesn't he judge the sinner now in this life? The Bible gives the answer: "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

Can you see his grace? God is giving us time to repent. God is giving us time to turn away from our sin and turn toward our Savior, Jesus, who loves us and gave his life up for us. God is giving us time to come home.

It is like the father in the parable of the lost son (Luke 15:11-32). Though we have run away, the Father sits on the porch, watching and waiting for us to return. This is the patient love of our loving Father in heaven.

In both the New Testament and the Old Testament, God has always been consistent. God is not soft on sin. He is serious about salvation.

ASK A QUESTION AT ➤ forwardinchrist.net/submit.

God has not grown soft on sin

David G. Scharf

GOD CERTAINLY SHOWED himself to be holy and willing to punish sin and disobedience in the Old Testament. At the same time, he also desired the salvation of all, even those in the Old Testament. Consider Jonah, the prophet of the Lord, who was sent to the Assyrian city of Nineveh to call its people to repentance.

GOD DOES NOT CHANGE

James 1:17 tells us that God does not change like shifting shadows. He is consistent. His nature and truth do not change. 1 Peter 1:16 quotes Leviticus 19:2, saying, "Be holy, because I am holy." God's standards have not changed from the Old Testament to the New Testament!

For what reasons do people believe or want to believe the falsehood that God has grown softer on sin? _____

THE SILENCE OF GOD IS NOT INDIFFERENCE

While God remains opposed to all sin, he is patient with us. However, we ought never confuse his patience with tolerance. Continuing in a sin when you know it is wrong is soul destroying! The writer to the Hebrews does not mince words when he says, "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left" (10:26).

Read 2 Peter 3:8-13.

What would you say to people who think that God will not punish sin and they can continue to do what is wrong?

GOD'S ANSWER TO SIN

Thank the Lord that he is the same yesterday, today, and always! Ever since the fall into sin, God made his plan known to send a Savior from sin. With consistent love, God protected the descendants of the Savior until the angel made that wonderful, world-changing announcement: "A Savior has been born to you!" This has always been who God is.

Read Exodus 34:6,7.

This is God's explanation of who he is. Pick out one attribute of God from the Exodus passage and cite one example of that attribute from the Old Testament and one example from the New Testament.

God's attribute: _____

Example from the Old Testament:

Example from the New Testament:

What does that attribute mean to you today? _____

Contributing editor David Scharf, a professor at Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota, is a member at St. Paul, New Ulm.

PARENT CONVERSATIONS

Should I or shouldn't I? It's a question I ask myself each Lenten season. Should I give something up? I know I don't need to, but would it help me to focus on this season in a more meaningful way? Now that I have children, it's something I've wrestled with even more. Every parenting article seems to include the observation that our actions speak louder than words. Would watching me give something up for Lent help my children remember the enormity of Jesus' sacrifice and his love for all of us? Should I encourage them to give something up as well? The two authors who write this month bring great perspective to this topic and remind us that this is not an area of faith that is spelled out for us. We can use our Christian freedom to decide what is best for ourselves and our families.

— Nicole Balza

SHOULD I GIVE SOMETHING UP FOR LENT?

I THINK THIS IS A GREAT question because it shows that you're taking Lent seriously. Remember that it's not a "right or wrong" kind of question, though. To give something up for Lent may be a time-tested practice, but like the season of Lent itself, it's not something God requires.

If you do decide to give something up for Lent, may God bless this effort. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

1. **Make it a personal devotion not a public statement.** Jesus has some strong warnings in Matthew chapter 6 against practicing your religion simply to let others see you. Choose something that will be a private reminder of Jesus' sacrifice, not a way to show off your own piety. On the other hand, if someone happens to notice your changed routine and asks you about it, it can be a great opportunity to talk about how you are giving

up a small thing to remember how Jesus gave up his life to redeem you.

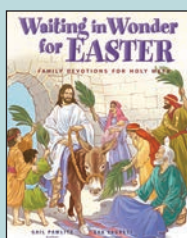
2. **Choose something spiritually "neutral" to give up, not something sinful.** Lent is a season of repentance. That doesn't mean

giving up a sin only temporarily but confessing and renouncing it completely. So if people declare that they are giving up a specific sin for Lent with the idea that they can run right back to that sin as soon as Lent ends, that makes a mockery of true repentance.

Instead, choose something you otherwise legitimately enjoy but will forego during Lent. It could be something that you would like to cut back on anyway, such as certain foods, TV, social media usage, or many other habits.

3. **Take your promise seriously—but also admit the possibility of failure.** This may sound contradictory, but both attitudes are important. If you are going to make a commitment to glorify Jesus during Lent in this way, obviously that's something that you should take very seriously. But I also think you should honestly admit that you might not

Gather
for Lenten devotions
This collection of 15 daily devotions, Bible verses, activities, and prayers can guide your family through the days leading up to Easter. Each day features something to read, something to say, something to do, and something to pray. Available from Northwestern Publishing House at nph.net or 800-662-6022.



Build a Lenten wreath

Consider helping your family focus on Jesus' love for them by building a Post-it® Note Lenten wreath. In the center of the wreath write, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Each day have family members attach a note that describes a way they showed Jesus' love to someone else. Explain that each note is a testimony of how the family thanked Jesus for loving them. The verse will remind family members of the reason we love others. By the end of Lent, the wreath will abound with acts of gratitude for grace.

succeed. We are weak human beings, but Jesus' commitment to saving us never faltered, even once. If weakness or forgetfulness causes you to fail in your pledge, it can remind you of why we all are utterly dependent on Jesus' strength, not our own. Humbly confess your failure and don't abandon the effort completely. Continue striving to uphold it for the rest of the season.

The choice of how best to commemorate Lent is yours to make. God bless your efforts, for Jesus' sake!



David Wietzke and his wife, Mary, are raising three sons and a daughter in Pueblo West, Colorado.

.....

MY 12-YEAR-OLD granddaughter and I munched McDonald's combo meals in a quiet corner of the restaurant.

We had discussed a variety of topics when I asked, "Have you ever thought about giving up something for Lent?"

Giving up things for Lent isn't something that the Bible tells us that we have to do.

"I think about that on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday," she replied after a moment's thought. "That's when we say farewell to alleluias at church and take away the alleluia banner. Is that what you mean?"

"Kind of. Sometimes Christians give up more during Lent than singing alleluias. Some Christians give up harmful habits—like smoking. Some

stop doing things or eating foods they really like. Chocolate, maybe."

"What? No chocolate?" she said in feigned horror.

I continued, "Or cupcakes. Or potato chips. . . ." I paused for dramatic effect. "Or french fries." With that, I stuffed an oversized fry into my mouth.

"But why would Christians give up anything for Lent?"

"What a great question! It's important to have the right answer. Some Christians give up things for the wrong reason. For example, they think that if they stop eating french fries during Lent they'll become more worthy of God's forgiveness."

"That's not right. Jesus has done everything we need to be forgiven."

"He absolutely has. But giving up something for Lent can have a positive side. Here's what I do. A few times a week I may drink a glass of wine before bed. During Lent, I don't. Instead, every time I think about wine, I pause to consider how much Jesus gave up for me when he died on the cross. Giving up wine becomes a little alarm bell that directs my heart toward Jesus."

"I like that. During Lent, every time I think, *It would be nice to have a piece of chocolate*, I'd be reminded to think about how much Jesus loves me."

"So, might there be some things you could use as an alarm?"

"Chocolate. Chewing gum. But it would be very, very, very hard for me to give up my privacy." Then with

deadpan humor, she added, "But it would be easy not to drink wine."

"I suppose giving up homework wouldn't be hard either."

"You're right. I don't like homework. It's boring. But I do like desserts."

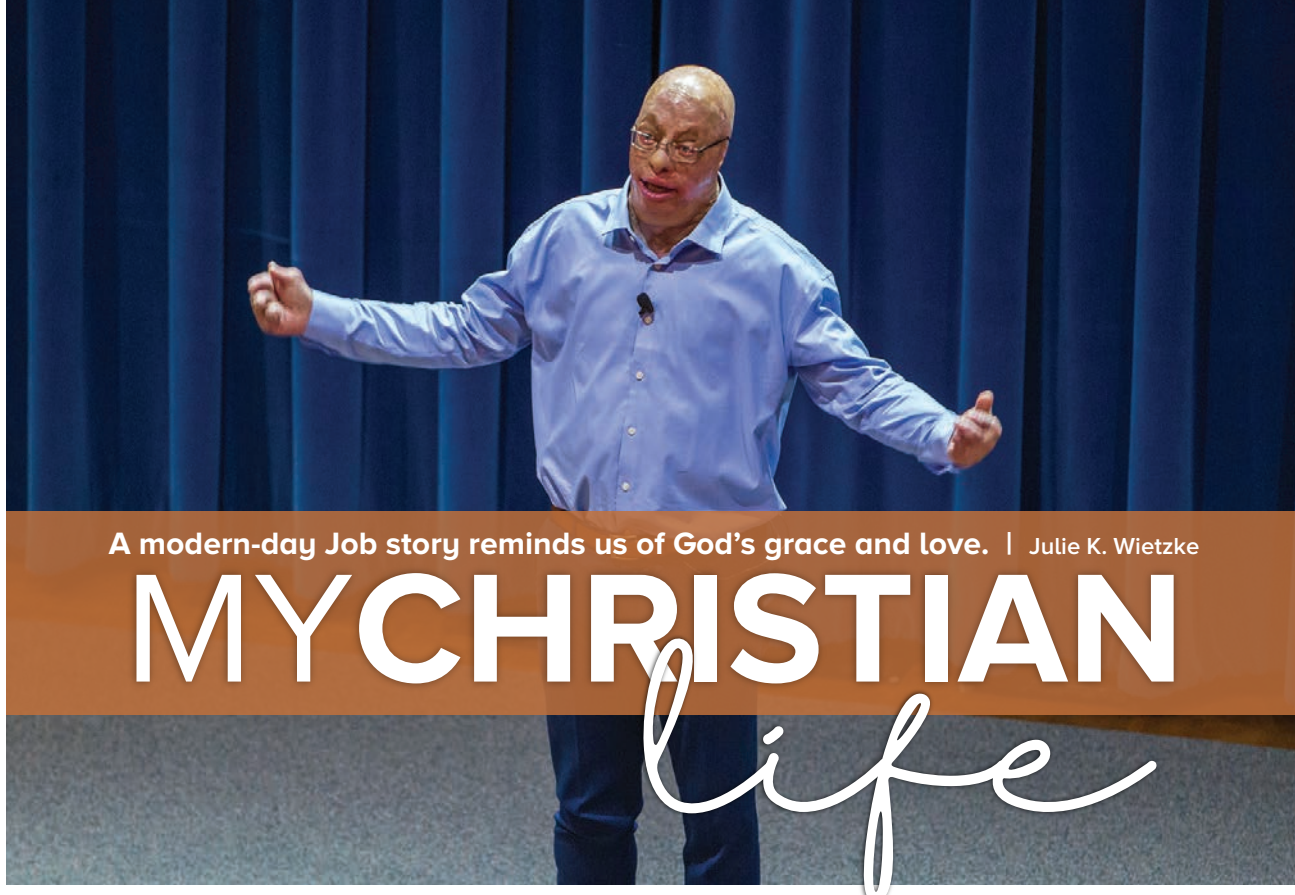
"You know," my teacher-mode kicked in, "giving up things for Lent isn't something that the Bible tells us that we have to do or even that we should do. But it can be a helpful spiritual discipline, something that helps us get more benefit out of Lent—and to celebrate Jesus' resurrection better."

Then came my call to action. "What do you think? Might you give up something during Lent to help you focus on Jesus?"

"Maybe. Just not chocolate."



James Aderman and his wife, Sharon, raised three daughters and are now enjoying their eight grandchildren.



A modern-day Job story reminds us of God's grace and love. | Julie K. Wietzke

MY CHRISTIAN life

FOR MOST PEOPLE, it would have been the worst day of their life.

Maybe it was for Spencer Beach, a member at St. Peter, St. Albert, Alberta, Canada, as well. While removing flooring from a new home, he was caught in an explosion and flash fire that caused third- and fourth-degree burns over 90 percent of his body. He was given a 5 percent chance of survival.

Sixteen years later, he still can remember every detail of that day, down to what it felt like when his skin was shrinking as the fire burned through layers of his fatty tissue and muscle.

Yet now he focuses on God's daily miracles and blessings rather than this "bad day." "If God can take a guy whose quality of life should have been so poor that he should have not been given a choice to live and work me into the person I have become now, how can you not see the grace and love of God?" he says.

"How can I ever say that this was not a blessing?"

THE FIRE

Spencer grew up in a strong WELS home in St. Albert. He made some bad decisions with drugs and alcohol in high school, which left him barely able to graduate. He joined the family business of installing flooring right after high school.

On April 24, 2003, at the age of 29, Spencer was using powerful chemicals to remove vinyl flooring from a brand-new home. He had a feeling that the process was highly dangerous, but as he says, "I was taught to work hard and not rock the boat." He was never trained in safety, but he followed the routine of opening the front door and the door to the garage to let the fumes out.

After taking a break to smoke and call his wife, he closed the front door to work on the flooring behind it. That change in the air current caused the garage door to slam shut as well. When a coworker opened and shut the front door again as he went outside, the change in the air temperature caused the furnace to turn on, pulling the oxygen to it, along with the powerful chemicals.

"I heard a loud whistle and a bang and the fire ignited," he says. There was even a mild explosion, but Spencer says he never felt it.

Spencer was covered in flames and immediately grabbed for the front door. It wouldn't open. He made his way to the door in the laundry room that led to the garage, but that didn't open either. "I could feel my clothes burning. The heat was deep. . . . It was inside of me," he says. He went back to the front door but still could not open it. "I could feel my energy being drained from me. I knew that I was in trouble." He tried one more time, returning to the laundry room door, but was trapped.

"At that point, I couldn't take it anymore. I just gave up. I collapsed into a ball," he says. "I just wanted it to end. I was ready to go to heaven."

He says that time stopped and everything became really peaceful. But then he thought about his wife, Tina, and their unborn baby she was carrying. He thought about everything important to him, everything he prayed for at night. He got back up and tried the door again. It opened.

THE DECISION

Now Spencer says he can see the blessings God gave him that day—that moment of peace he felt when he thought he was going to die, the off-duty nurse who was outside when he rushed out of the house, and the best burn-unit doctor in Canada serving as his physician.

“My exact words were, ‘I don’t care. Do what it takes for me to live. I do not want to die.’ ”

But at the time he knew the situation was dire. “When the paramedic knelt beside me, the expression on his face was burned into my memory,” he says. He was awake as he traveled by ambulance to the hospital, where he, covered from head to toe by a sheet, was rushed past his wife. All she saw was his arm.

The next five minutes were crucial. The doctor told Spencer how bad the burns were and gave him a 5 percent chance of survival. “I’m a very focused person, so to me a 5 percent chance meant I wasn’t going to die,” says Spencer. “But he was telling me, ‘You’re going to die.’ ”

Then the doctor asked Spencer if he wanted to live or die, because if he decided to fight and he survived,

his quality of life would be poor.

“My exact words were, ‘I don’t care. Do what it takes for me to live. I do not want to die.’ ”

THE BATTLE

After seeing his wife and his mother for a few minutes, Spencer was put into a medically-induced coma, dur-

ing which he had six weeks of nightmares based on what was happening to him in real life.

When he woke up, he was down to 112 pounds. He couldn’t talk, couldn’t eat, couldn’t move.

“I had a lot of time to contemplate,” he says. “I would replay the events over and over again. Replaying the events really led to a blame game. I began asking, ‘Why me?’ ”

He sank into depression and was filled with anxiety. “I was holding onto God’s Word, but at the same time I was pushing it away,” he says. “My faith was being twisted and challenged. There was a battle going on, and who was going to win was unknown at that time.”

After eight weeks, he remembers being able to talk for the first time. He was finally able to say, “I love you,” to his wife, Tina—words he had forgotten to say the day of the accident. It was his gift to her on their fifth wedding anniversary.

He also remembers his pastor and a Christian brother from church visiting him to bring him the Word, although he says he sometimes turned down Communion because he didn’t think he deserved it.

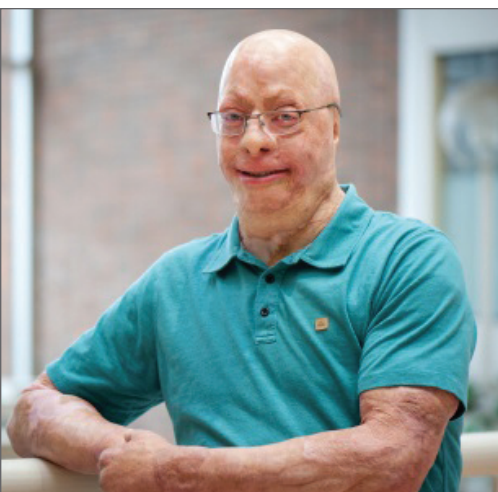
“I was angry and depressed. I didn’t see anything worth fighting for,” he says. “I was looking inside, looking at someone I didn’t recognize anymore.”

At one point, his depression got so bad that he started having suicidal thoughts, actually planning how he could kill himself.

“Physically, I couldn’t kill myself, which is another blessing,” he says. “This gave me time.”

He continues, “I finally hit rock bottom and internally screamed out, ‘All right, Lord, you said you wouldn’t give me more than I can handle. You take it!’ ”

God did take it and provided Spencer a blessing that changed his perspective. That blessing was the birth of his daughter, Amber.



Spencer Beach before and after the accident and with his family: wife, Tina, and children, Amber and Aiden.

"My life is better than it ever was."



THE BLESSINGS

Five months after the fire, Tina was laying Amber into Spencer's arms. Amber was one day old. Spencer still couldn't move, but he could hold her and look at her and love her.

"I found out what was important," he says. "Everything I ever prayed for, God protected. I stopped looking inside and started looking outside and seeing things worth fighting for."

He continues, "I didn't want to get better up until then. Now I saw all these people trying to help me get better, and the only person that was not helping me get better was me. God had already given me everything that I needed. I just wasn't using it."

Five months later, Spencer was transferred to a rehabilitation hospital. After two weeks, he rolled over by himself, something he never thought he would be able to do. "I thought to myself, *What other stupid barriers am I putting in my way that I haven't challenged yet?* Instead of asking, 'Why me?', I started asking a different question, 'What else can I do?'"

Sixteen years later—after an initial hospital stay of 14 months, five years of recovery, and 39 surgeries—Spencer is a motivational speaker. "People look at me and see this guy who is disabled, but I'm not. There is very little that I can't do," he says.

He's also involved in his church, serving as a Pioneer leader, treasurer of the congregation, and even as a delegate at the last synod convention.

"I realized that not only is there a place on this earth for me, I should be proud of who I am—and I need to take that charge forward with full vigor. To hold back in any way is not only going to hold me back, but I also am not living up to the purpose of why God put me here."

"Everything I ever prayed for, God protected. I stopped looking inside and started looking outside and seeing things worth fighting for."

He continues, "Although nothing was wrong with me being a floor layer, my life is better than it ever was. I have more purpose and meaning and passion and inspiration."

THE ANSWER

Going back to his question of why me, Spencer says he discovered the answer: Because I'm alive.

"In the fall into sin, God said there will be bad days. . . . and that's the whole basis of the answer," he says.

"If you think you can go through life without having a bad day, you're not alive."

He continues, "There are so many passages that say hardship is going to happen and when it does, come to [God]. But that's the opposite of what we do. When hardship happens, we blame God, which is the old Adam and sinful nature coming out.

"You need to turn to Scripture; trust in it. Open your eyes, see those miracles, and use them. Let your bad days happen. Bad days are a part of life. But if you're having weeks of bad days, then maybe you need to stop and check and say, 'Is this how I want this week to go? Another week of bad days?' Or do I want to turn my eyes out? Do I want to grab on to these blessings that God is continually throwing into my path?"

"My life is better than it ever was. How can I ever say that this was not a blessing?"



Julie Wietzke is managing editor of *Forward in Christ* magazine.

Spencer is willing to do free presentations for any WELS congregation or group. Contact him at spencerspeaks.ca/contact.

A new twist on vacation Bible school

Last summer, St. Peter, Modesto, Calif., decided to try something new with its summer programs for kids.

The congregation had been conducting a morning soccer Bible camp each year aimed at children in pre-school through grade 4. But the congregation realized they were missing children who weren't into sports. So members added a traditional church summer camp to the mix—but they put a twist on it.

"We decided to hold a multigenerational vacation Bible school in the evenings and invite both parents and kids to attend," says Dan Schroeder, pastor at St. Peter. "This way parents can model to their kids the importance of being in the Word. They also get to do something fun together."

For three evenings, people of all ages gathered together for supper, singing, and Scripture. "One of the goals of

our Bible study time was to have all ages interact with one another as they discovered and learned Bible truths and shared their faith," says Schroeder. "The questions were purposely designed to prompt dialogue about the life and actions of a Bible character, God's interaction in the character's life, and ways we live out our own Christian lives."

Kids—both young and young-at-heart—also enjoyed craft time (especially the modeling clay), which reinforced the Bible study lessons.

The VBS averaged 35 people a night and included several non-member families from the pre-school and earlier soccer camp.

Schroeder says one of the program's benefits is offering an easy setting for adults to talk about spiritual truths with their children. "It gives parents an opportunity to practice so that it



becomes more natural to share their faith in their daily lives."

St. Peter is planning on offering the program again this summer. "It was a joy to be able to watch the interaction," says Schroeder. "It was loud, but it was a good loud. You could feel learning was happening."

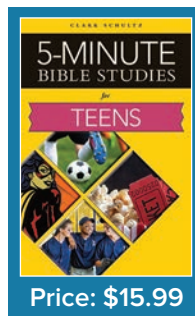
LEARN MORE AT forwardinchrist.net. There Schroeder shares tips on putting together a multigenerational VBS. See examples of other WELS summer Bible camps on p. 4.

BOOK NOOK

BIBLE STUDIES FOR TEENS

Clark Schultz's *5-Minute Bible Studies for Teens* is a great devotion book for modern teenagers. The short devotions are meaningful, yet they do not take up much time, which is especially important in the lives of teenagers. Between school, extracurriculars, jobs, and other activities, finding free time can be difficult. With three devotions per week, this book allows for flexibility.

While they are short, the devotions do not skimp on message or meaning. A brief Bible passage or summary sets the mood of the devotion. Starting with Adam and Eve and going through the New Testament, the reader is taken on a journey through Scripture. The actual devotions are very applicable, without being too stereotypical or corny. They are real, with relatable situations and funny comments, but cover many aspects that affect a teenager's life. From relationships with others to personal sins, the devotions attack the issues with a teenager's perspectives in mind.



While all teenagers would benefit from this book, I think it is especially applicable to high school students. This book can be read individually or with a small group. I read it with my Bible study group, and we all really enjoyed it.

Reflective questions at the end of each devotion get the reader thinking and allow for personal meditation. The questions are also great to talk about with others. Ending each devotion with a prayer is a great way to connect with God. The prayers are not too wordy, so it feels like something that a reader would actually pray, not just something to read.

As a teenager with a busy life, I found this to be the best devotion book that I've come across. I highly recommend this for anyone looking for a devotion book that is meaningful but does not require a strict schedule.

Megan Himm, a senior at Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School, Jackson, Wisconsin, is a member at Bethlehem, Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin.

A look at books published by Northwestern Publishing House. For more information, visit nph.net or call 800-662-6022.

Lutheran leadership conference a success

WELS Congregational Services hosted the first ever WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership in Chicago, Jan. 21–23. Approximately 800 people, representing about 350 WELS congregations, met to hear five plenary speakers and attend a selection of breakout sessions.

“The focus of the conference was that we want to do all we can with the gospel to serve Christ’s mission,” says Jonathan Hein, coordinator of WELS Congregational Services. “‘Doing all we can with the gospel’ requires leaders to focus on two things. First, we look at tactics. Is the way we are carrying out gospel ministry smart?”

He continues, “But underneath tactics is congregational culture. The group—the collective—needs to have the right thoughts, habits, and attitudes. That was what the plenaries were all about.”

The conference planning committee is exploring options for a second WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership, likely sometime in 2022.

LEARN MORE AT ➤ lutheranleadership.com.



Attendees were treated to a preview of the new hymnal, set to be released by Advent 2021. Maintaining the name *Christian Worship*, the new hymnal comprises a suite of resources, including a stand-alone psalter, musical arrangements for various instrumentation, and a service folder builder. Conference worship services and devotions used liturgical and hymn arrangements from the new hymnal.



Attendees attended five breakout sessions, picked from more than 20 available sessions on a wide variety of topics. Hein says many attendees were interested in workshops that focused on personal evangelism and on reaching and retaining younger generations. Pictured are presenters Luke Thompson, who spoke on outreach to millennials, and Kathie Wendland, who led a breakout titled “Teach Women to Teach What is Good.”



The first day started with presentations on how lay leaders and called workers encourage one another, finding our voice as a gospel-centered church, and urging men and women to use their gifts to serve God. The evening concluded with worship and communion.



Of the 800 attendees of the conference, nearly 40 percent were lay leaders. Almost 200 women attended. “I found the conference to be a great boost to my faith in the good Lord and what he has done for me,” says Scott Krause, a member at St. Luke’s, Watertown, Wis. “My main takeaway was that I need to focus on a daily basis to love and reach out to my friends, family, and neighbors with the good news of the gospel.”

Mission trips provide new perspectives and opportunities

For the past five years, teens from St. John, Wauwatosa, Wis., have hit the road each summer to drive across the country. What were they doing? Helping mission churches reach out in their communities through summer camps.

“It’s an entire vacation Bible school team in a box,” says Kyle Bitter, pastor at St. John.

The trips are no small task. In 2019, five vans took almost 40 teens and 15 chaperones to two locations: Rock Hill, S.C., to help Illumine Lutheran Church run a science camp, and Mississauga, Ontario, Canada, to help with a soccer Bible camp at Cross of Life.

The idea for these mission trips started when a group of parents at St. John asked about taking an overnight trip with a ministry focus for the eighth-grade class at St. John’s school. St. John had been wanting to do more youth ministry so decided to broaden the idea and offer the opportunity to all its youth from confirmed through high school.

“I was expecting 10 kids to sign up the first time,” says Bitter. “We ended up having 27 who wanted to go.” The group continued to grow and broadened its reach to include multiple destinations.

Ethan Rindfleisch, St. John’s member and a sophomore at the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse, has gone five times on these trips, serving in South Carolina, Georgia, and Ontario, Canada. He also started taking overseas mission trips through his high school. “Personally, I have grown so much in my faith and in my roles as an evangelist, a volunteer, and a brother in Christ,” he says.

Bitter says this experience encourages St. John’s teens—who are used to a congregation of 1,200 members with a large school—to look at mission and ministry in a different way. “For them to go and see what a mis-

sion church is like is a good experience for them,” he says. “They can see the camaraderie that small congregations have and the cool benefits in a church that is very different from what they grew up in.”



Ethan Rindfleisch volunteered to help at a soccer Bible camp at Cross of Life, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada, last summer.



Last summer, teens from St. John, Wauwatosa, traveled to South Carolina to help Illumine, Rock Hill, run a science camp for 140 children.

“The environment at these churches is very different from here at St. John’s or other local WELS churches, and it is really refreshing to see different styles of worship and fellowship,” says Julia Treichel, St. John’s member and a senior at Wisconsin Lutheran High School, Milwaukee. “I always come home wanting to become closer to those around me and share God’s love with others because I had so much fun doing it on the mission trip.”

According to Bitter, teens also learn different ways they can serve at church. But that’s not only from their experiences on the mission trip. Teens must spend 20 hours volunteering at St. John—ranging from coaching grade school sports to working concessions at sports events to teaching Sunday school to helping with community events—before they can even go on the trip.

“We want to give them that experience of what kinds of things you can be involved with in a congregation as you are moving into being an adult member,” says Bitter. “We want them to view their relationship with church as an important part of life. It’s not a place my parents take me on Sunday, but it’s a place I’m actually a part of and a place I can live out my faith with other Christians.”

St. John plans to continue its annual teen mission trip this year. Teens who have attended in the past are encouraging others to try it as well. “It is an amazing experience where you not only get to help another church but also where you can cultivate skills for interacting with people from all different walks of life and for spreading God’s Word,” says Rindfleisch.

READ MORE AT forwardinchrist.net, where you’ll find another interview with a St. John’s member who is now studying for the ministry. Learn how Bible camps provide community outreach opportunities in this month’s edition of *WELS Connection*.

Church in Panama City rededicated after hurricane

What a difference a year makes. On Oct. 10, 2018, Hurricane Michael blew through Panama City as a category five hurricane, severely damaging the church and parsonage of Amazing Grace as well as the homes of many of its members. On Oct. 20, 2019, Amazing Grace moved back into its rebuilt worship facility. During that year, more than 200 WELS volunteers poured into Panama City to help Amazing Grace with the necessary cleanup and rebuilding. In addition, people from around the world joined together in praying for their Christian brothers and sisters and donating funds and materials to help.

In the immediate aftermath of the storm, Amazing Grace's members banded together to check on one another and to help each other. As soon as the roads were cleared, members from neighboring congregations also pitched in. Then volunteers from WELS Christian Aid and Relief and Kingdom Workers' Builders For Christ began arriving, including more than 40 Martin Luther College students who volunteered at various times.

"It was an eye-opening experience," says Hailey Stade, one of the Martin Luther College students who helped with cleanup. "I had no idea what to expect until we crossed the bridge to Panama City. Buildings were flattened. Every tree you saw was on the ground or bent in half. Power lines lay all over the sides of streets and sidewalks. A building was considered lucky if it even had some of its roof intact."

The roof of Amazing Grace's church was ripped open during the storm and the parsonage's roof was peeled up, causing flooding throughout the home. With such extensive water damage, most items needed to be replaced, and much needed to be rebuilt. Yet Amazing Grace was blessed with donations and volunteers to lighten the load.

On Jan. 12, 2020, members of Amazing Grace rededicated their worship space and invited volunteers back to celebrate. About 25 volunteers who helped with the rebuilding attended.

"The grand reopening was more like a grand reunion," says David Kehl, pastor at Amazing Grace.

Although the past year posed many challenges for them, members agree that this experience brought them closer together—with each other, with their fellow WELS members, and with their community. As they move forward, they're excited to take the next step with their ministry plans.

As Torger Reppen, president of Amazing Grace, notes, "It's so nice to be back in our own building, our own home. Now we can focus on outreach. We've been focusing on rebuilding, and now we can focus on daily church stuff."

SEE MORE AT [forwardinchrist.net](https://www.forwardinchrist.net), including photos of Amazing Grace during its rebuilding process.



Amazing Grace, Panama City, Fla., following Hurricane Michael.



Volunteers from churches around the synod helped to rebuild.



Hurricane Michael served as a catalyst to bring Amazing Grace's members together. Here they are shown with their rebuilt church.



Amazing Grace was blessed to have four of its former pastors as well as its current pastor attend its grand reopening service. When Hurricane Michael hit, Jerome Enderle (second from right) was serving as Amazing Grace's vacancy pastor because Dan Burgess (far left) took a call in July 2018. In January 2019, Richard Schleicher (far right) replaced Enderle as vacancy pastor. In June 2019, Dave Kehl (second from left) accepted the call to be Amazing Grace's full-time pastor. Richard Warnecke (middle) served as Amazing Grace's first pastor in 1986 and also helped coordinate the disaster relief efforts for WELS Christian Aid and Relief following Hurricane Michael. As one member notes, "God has seen us through and taught many lessons of his grace, protection, and power."

District news

PACIFIC NORTHWEST

Faith, Anchorage, Alaska, hosted its second Epiphany by Candlelight program on Jan. 11. The event began because Faith's 2018 Advent by Candlelight program needed to be rescheduled due to a major earthquake that took place the day before the event was originally scheduled in December. The women of Faith

discovered that January is a wonderful time to gather together to focus on the Savior after the busy holiday season and to prepare their hearts for the season of Epiphany.

The district reporters for this month are: AZ-CA—Michael Schroeder; MN—James Panning; PNW—David Birsching; SEW—Scott Oelhafen.



SOUTHEASTERN WISCONSIN

Following the WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership in January, missionaries who serve in city centers in the United States and Canada gathered in Chicago, Ill., to share ministry ideas and encouragement. "Our goal—and our prayer—is that WELS urban missionaries can be better equipped today than they ever have been," says Lucas Bitter, the conference coordinator and pastor at Intown Lutheran, Atlanta, Ga., "so that we can reach the center cities to the very best of our ability in the future." Pictured are three missionaries in Canada who attended the first Center City Missionaries Conference. Far left and right are Qiang Wang and Geoff Cortright, who serve in Vancouver, and in the middle is Caleb Schultz, who serves in Mississauga.



MINNESOTA

On Jan. 26, St. Paul, New Ulm, Minn., held a dedication service and open house for its school expansion and renovation project. Highlights of the new space include preschool classrooms (shown), a STEM lab, and an art room. Pictured (from left) are preschool teachers Heidi Meyer and Becky Guenther.



SOUTHEASTERN WISCONSIN

On Jan. 11, Trinity, Crete, Ill., held a game day for its youth group and its seniors. As one attendee noted, "This was not a board game day but a bit more active."



ARIZONA-CALIFORNIA

St. Peter, Clovis, Calif., held its first live nativity in December 2019.



MINNESOTA

Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., hosted its annual Evangelism Day for students on Jan. 15. "Evangelism Day," says student Maddy Leckwee, "is filled with energy and fire for the gospel. It makes you excited for the work you are training to do." Pictured is Erika Rosenbaum, a junior, who is shown during an evangelism training workshop.



PHOTO | Lightstock

PLEASE EXPLAIN

WHOM DO WE BLAME FOR BAD THINGS? | Jeffrey L. Samelson

IT'S A QUESTION the disciples asked Jesus, and it's not an unusual one: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). They wanted to know who got the blame for this bad thing, even if it might mean assuming an unborn boy committed some great evil—or would grow to do something worth being proactively punished.

We are all familiar with this blame-seeking instinct. When life goes along comfortably, or good things happen, we don't usually concern ourselves much with asking who's responsible. We might remember to thank God for his blessings, yet that raises the question: If God gets the credit for the good, should he also get the blame for the bad?

Some might suggest that Christ's answer to his disciples' question did put the blame on the Almighty: "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that God's works

might be revealed in connection with him" (John 9:3).

Some time later another follower pretty much came out and said it. Mary and Martha had sent word that their brother, Lazarus, was near death, but Jesus had delayed. When he finally arrived, Martha said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21). Her unspoken accusation: "You could have healed him, but you didn't come, so this is your fault."

Jesus didn't defend himself. Instead he gave her the assurance that she would find God's grace on the other side of the tragedy: "Your brother will rise again" (v. 23). But some might wish that Christ had answered her accusation, so that we could have a definitive answer.

Yet even without a direct statement from Jesus, we are able to know who gets the blame for bad things.

THE ORIGINAL BLAME GAME

In Genesis chapter 3 we learn not only about the origin of sin but also about the original blame game. When the Lord graciously seeks out Adam, inviting repentance, Adam doesn't take responsibility for his disobedience but blames Eve for giving him the fruit to eat. He even takes things further by calling her "the woman you gave to be with me." He essentially said the whole mess was God's fault. When Eve is confronted, she points the finger at Satan in his serpent form, who "deceived" her.

When God speaks to the serpent, we hear no response, but why would we? The devil would offer no excuse, because he had done exactly what he intended to do. He had succeeded in bringing evil into the Lord's previously perfect creation. The devil was happy to take the blame.

But he was not so pleased, perhaps, to hear the Creator's curse. God not only condemned the snake to a life of eating dust but also spoke a promise that told Satan his success would end. From the woman's seed would come a Savior who would crush the serpent's head. This good news of grace and salvation was God's answer to Adam's accusation that this whole mess was God's fault. God didn't bring evil into the world, but he was going to put an end to it.

Our first parents weren't off the hook, though. The curses the Lord spoke to them made clear that they were still responsible for the sinful choices they had made. They were also responsible for the bad things that came from those choices. There were consequences for them and their lives immediately. Still, because God is gracious, they got much less than the immediate death and destruction their disobedience deserved.

SO WHO IS TO BLAME?

What about the man born blind? What about my brother dying so young? What about Mom's cancer, Dad losing his job, that hurricane, terrorism, war, abortion, and this accident that not only dented my car but ruined my day? The universal truths about sin and evil and a cursed creation don't always satisfy our urge to blame someone.

It's tempting to make God responsible for everything. But the truth is that since the Lord is perfectly holy, he is absolutely incapable of causing anything unholy. When he permits evil to happen or uses bad things for his good purposes, he is not in any way the author of evil. In his wisdom and love he allows the unholy and incorporates it into his plans. He doesn't get the blame for sin or the consequence of sin.

So can we go the opposite extreme and simply blame the devil? Yes and no. Yes, Satan started it all, encourages it all, and does what he can to organize it all for his evil purposes. But no, unlike the Lord, he is limited in both presence and power. He simply cannot be everywhere, nor can he be responsible for all that happens. So we can

Throughout Scripture we find God changing the conversation from "Look at this evil someone has done or the trouble someone is in" to "Look at the love the Lord shows to sinners!"

blame him generally for the spread of pornography that has corrupted so many people, but not necessarily for the fact that your brother Sean is addicted to it. We can blame the devil for false religions like Islam, but not necessarily for your neighbor Ahmed backing his car onto your lawn.

Should we just blame other people then? It can be satisfying to point out how others' bad choices lead to their bad consequences. It can be comforting to shift responsibility for what's wrong in your life to someone else's actions. Oftentimes we're even right.

But just as often we need to be honest and take blame for our own choices and their consequences. I failed that exam because I didn't study. Your marriage is unhappy because you don't love your wife or respect your husband. We lost our house because we didn't pay our bills. Anytime we look to parcel out blame for bad things, we should begin by examining ourselves and repenting of our own sins.

Even so, we can't always find someone to blame. Smithstown is flat-

tened by a sudden summer storm. Sally gets lung cancer, but neither she nor anyone around her has ever smoked. These things we must blame simply on the fact that we are sinners living in a sin-sick world. All creation has been corrupted since Adam's fall, and bad things happen to the evil and the good alike. We all live here.

This is where God comes in again. He ignores no one's suffering and turns a blind eye to no one's sin, but throughout Scripture we find God changing the conversation from "Look at this evil someone has done or the trouble someone is in" to "Look at the love the Lord shows to sinners!" If we consider how much you and I sin, how thoroughly corrupted our world is, and how intent Satan is on destroying all that is good and godly, it's amazing that we don't suffer more than we do. God wants our focus to be on his goodness and grace and on how he solved the problem of evil once and for all by sending his Son. The more we busy ourselves with giving God credit for the good he shows us, the less we will care about casting blame for what's bad.



Jeffrey Samelson is pastor at Christ, Clarksville, Maryland.

The Scripture references used in this article are from the Evangelical Heritage Version.

HAVE YOU EVER FASTED 40 days and 40 nights out in the wilderness? Have you ever been taken to the highest point of the temple with no safety net, just you and the devil, 450 feet above a ravine? Have you ever stood on top of a mountain with a panoramic view of all the kingdoms of the world and been told that they could all be yours, free, painless, quick—just get down on a knee in front of me? Ever been tempted like that? No, of course not.

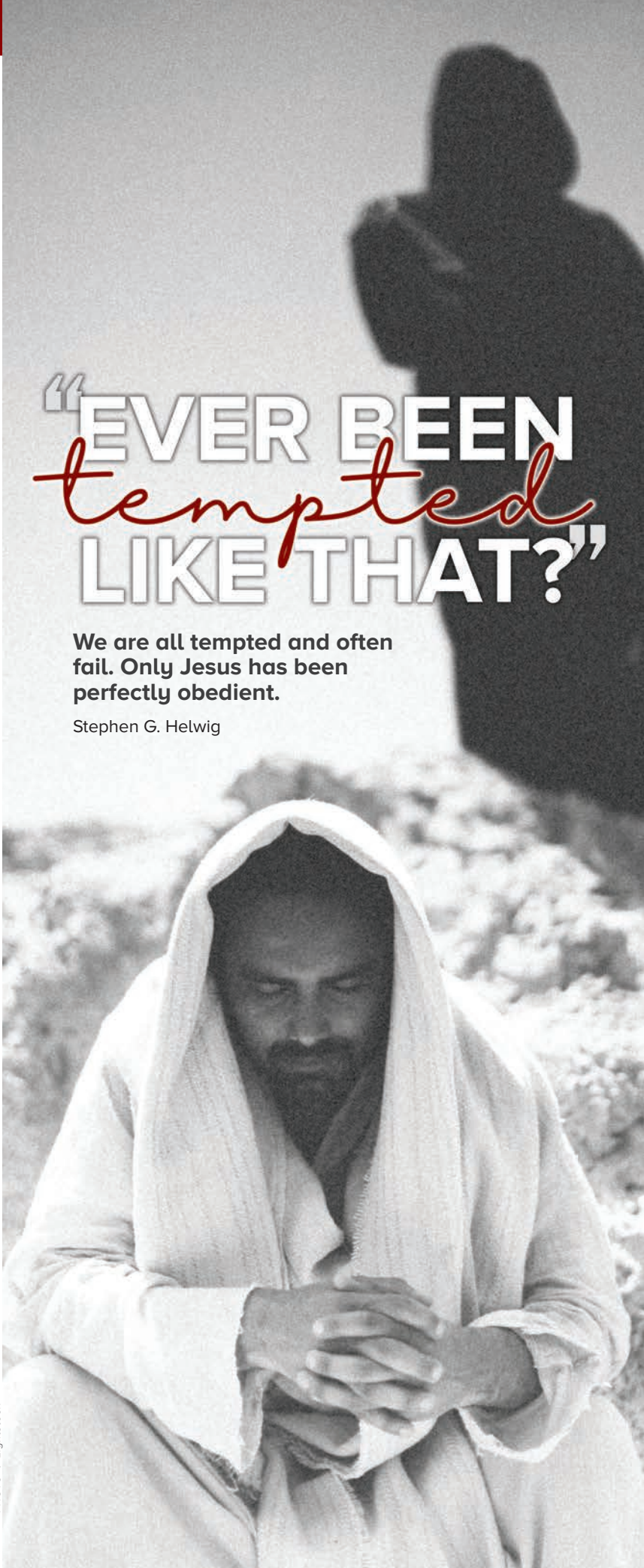
But do you even find those temptations all that tempting? Are they really all that hard to resist? Turn stones into bread? You're hungry! What's the harm in that? Jump off the temple? Who would stand on the ledge of a tall building and then jump off? Angels or no angels, is that all that big of a temptation? Worship the devil? Bend a knee to Satan? For what? Something that doesn't even belong to him in the first place. Like he'd really follow through on his end of the bargain anyway!

At first glance, these temptations might not be all that difficult to resist. But let's be honest, it wasn't really about eating or jumping or worshipping Satan. What was Satan really up to? Understanding those things will give us a greater appreciation of who Jesus is and what he did to save us. When we understand that, it will open our eyes to the temptations that Satan places before us. That will help us appreciate our righteous robe and Jesus' sinless sacrifice. It will also empower us to fight against the temptations that we face every day.

A DEEPER LOOK

God had a plan for Jesus. He became a human being. He became obedient to his heavenly Father, the way we are supposed to obey. As a perfect human, Jesus did not have the right to question God or to change his plan. He became like us. Jesus was there in the wilderness, hungry as he was, trusting that his Father would take care of him. So, no miracles. No bread. Just complete trust—and perfect obedience.

Ever been tempted like that? Ever been tempted to think that God won't provide for you? Ever been tempted to wonder why God hasn't helped you? Ever been tempted to question God's will for your life? What possible purpose could he have for your illness, your grief, your pain, your loss?



**“EVER BEEN
tempted
LIKE THAT?”**

We are all tempted and often fail. Only Jesus has been perfectly obedient.

Stephen G. Helwig

God had a plan for Jesus, and, yes, that plan was to die—but not there, not then, not in that way. But was this temptation even about dying? “Hey, Jesus, you’re the Son of God. Your Father isn’t going to let anything happen to you before the appointed time. He has his angels. He will command them to guard you. Prove God’s love for you. Prove that angels do indeed exist. Prove it to yourself. Prove it to the world. Prove it to me. Jump.”

But Jesus had nothing to prove. Not about himself. Not about God. Not about angels. He completely trusted his heavenly Father. He would not put God to the test by acting foolishly or recklessly.

Have we ever been tempted to act recklessly? Have we ever done that? Get behind the wheel after one beer too many? Drive too fast for conditions? Listening to the little voice telling you that God will take care of you no matter how foolish your actions? Tempting God?

God had a plan for Jesus, and that plan was to put all his enemies under his feet and to have every knee bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord. But such a position and such power would come at a price. Jesus would have to suffer. Jesus would have to die. Abuse, suffering, pain. Abandonment, hell, death. Satan said he had

a better way, an easier way. “Don’t do that, Jesus. You don’t need to suffer. You can have all this without the abuse, suffering, and pain; without the abandonment, hell, and death. It’ll just take a second. It won’t hurt a bit. Just take a knee. Bow down to me. This will all be yours, and you can avoid the cross.”

Ever been tempted like that? To take the easy way out? What’s easier: Putting your offering in the plate or spending that money on yourself? What’s easier: Obeying God when tempted or doing what our others want, even if it is wrong? Do we give up our desire to love God in order to make friends and be accepted? We don’t want to be ridiculed. We don’t want to be judged. We don’t want to lose a friend. The way of the cross, the way of Christ—living and sharing our faith—will come with its share of suffering. Our sinful flesh wants to avoid that suffering, so we take the easy way out.

CLOTHED WITH CHRIST’S PERFECT OBEDIENCE

Yes, we have been tempted. Yes, we have given in. Yes, we have sinned. But Jesus didn’t. “[He] has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin” (Hebrews 4:15). “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth” (1 Peter 2:22). Satan was not successful. Jesus resisted him. Jesus used God’s

Word to put the devil in his place.

Jesus didn’t die at the bottom of the Kidron Valley 450 feet below the temple, but he did die on top of Calvary nailed to a cross—a lamb, the Lamb, without blemish or defect; the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The innocent One was covered with the guilt of all—all the failures of all people, all the times we have yielded to temptation. The Son whom God loved was abandoned and forsaken. The eternal One died. Jesus’ perfect obedience is ours. In Jesus, God declares us not guilty. As Paul writes, “Just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous” (Romans 5:19).

The sinful are now covered with holiness. The guilty are now covered with innocence. Those deserving to die will live forever. That’s you. That’s me. That’s all who believe in Jesus.

Temptations will continue to come, but God’s Word encourages us, “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). He has to. He has been defeated. And, in Christ, you have been crowned the victor!



Stephen Helwig is pastor at Gethsemane, Omaha, Nebraska.

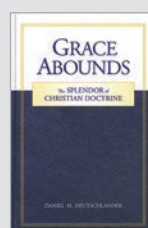
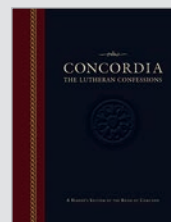
FOR FURTHER STUDY

“To feel temptation is therefore a far different thing from consenting or yielding to it. . . . Therefore, we Christians must be armed and daily expect to be incessantly attacked” (*Book of Concord, Large Catechism*, 107/109).

“Believers can’t stop temptations from coming into their lives. They can, however, by the power of the gospel, stop sin from taking over their lives” (*God So Loved the World*, p. 329).

READ MORE

Book of Concord, Luther’s Large Catechism: The Sixth Petition



Grace Abounds: The Splendor of Christian Doctrine
D. Deutschlander
pp. 209-220

These books are available from Northwestern Publishing House, nph.net, 800-662-6022.



The Christ

Christianity is not just a label, a category, or a space to be filled in for some pollster. We are named after Christ. The shepherds heard the angels identify the baby as Christ (*christos*), the Lord. Both Mary and Joseph were told that the baby would be called Jesus (Luke 1:31; Matthew 1:21). That name meant he would “save his people from their sins.”

Both names—Jesus and Christ, the name the angels proclaimed—have deep significance. Names back then were more important than they are today. Now parents often choose a family name or a name that simply appeals to them from a long list of names.

This Lent we see him with clarity. He was anointed to die in our place.

After the angels used the name Christ, we don’t encounter it again until Jesus began his ministry. Then in Nazareth’s synagogue, Jesus found a passage from Isaiah (Luke 4:14-21). He quoted the prophet’s words, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed (a form of *christos* in Greek) me to proclaim good news to the poor” (Isaiah 61:1,2). That word *anointed* identified the One who was to come—the Christ. He would be the Anointed One.

Those who came to worship on that Sabbath had no doubt heard the idea of anointing before. They knew how David, the high priest, and some of the prophets were anointed. They understood that the anointed one was someone who was dedicated to the Lord’s service. That person had the approval of the Lord God and the responsibility to carry out his God-given work. The Old Testament also hinted that the One who would come was the anointed promised deliverer.

Jesus took the occasion to quote this passage from Isaiah where the word *anointed*

referred to him: “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). Jesus claimed to be the Anointed One. Those in the synagogue were incensed by what Jesus said and were ready to kill him for claiming to be like David, the high priest, and the prophets—and, more than all of them, the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed.

They failed to kill him that day, but it didn’t take long before others wanted him dead. The Pharisees began to plot his death when Jesus claimed to be Lord of the Sabbath and healed on the Sabbath to prove it (Matthew 12:1-14).

Others discovered that Jesus was indeed the Anointed One—the Christ. Peter confessed clearly what the disciples believed, “You are the Christ (*christo*), the Son of the Living God” (Matthew 16:16 EHV). Peter and the others believed Jesus was the Anointed One who came as God’s promised deliverer.

Peter and the others may have had a fuzzy vision of what Jesus had come to do. Jesus told them more than once that he would be handed over to the Jews, suffer and die, but then rise again. But even then, the disciples didn’t grasp it all until after it all happened.

This Lent we see him with clarity. He was anointed to die in our place. He is the Christ, anointed to finish our salvation.

After Jesus ascended, believers in Antioch were first called “Christians” (Acts 11:26). They were anointed (1 John 2:27) and connected with the Anointed One—the Christ. They preached Christ crucified and risen again (1 Corinthians 1:23). We are Christians in our world today. We too are associated with the Anointed One, the Christ. Our message is the same. It’s all about the Anointed One—Christ.

John A. Braun | FIC Editor

USING BIBLE STORIES TO EXAMINE CHARACTERISTICS OF GOD THAT WE NEVER THOUGHT ABOUT, CHARACTERISTICS THAT APPLY TO WHAT WE'RE FACING RIGHT NOW.

A BIBLE STORY

just for me

Gregory C. Lyon



PHOTO | Lightstock

LONGING FOR THE MOUNTAINTOP, SITTING UNDER A SHRUB: DEPRESSION

LONELINESS. HOPELESSNESS. A lack of motivation. A lack of purpose. It's been described as a black cloud that doesn't go away. It's not just having a bad day. It's so much more than that.

Depression hits millions of people, shaking them to their core, challenging their beliefs. To think that Christians "should" just get over it or "shouldn't" be feeling this way minimizes the damaging effects.

That doesn't mean there's no hope.

ELIJAH'S DEPRESSION

Elijah was God's faithful prophet in the face of the vilest king and queen that Israel had ever known. What happened? He had the mountaintop experience when he literally saw God rain fire down his enemies (1 Kings 18). But that was then. In 1 Kings 19, this great prophet became a shell of himself with the struggles that are common to so many.

Can you identify some of those depressive symptoms (see 1 Kings 19: 3,4,10,14)?

All the signs of depression are there for Elijah. He couldn't just snap out of it, and you may have noticed that the Lord didn't just make it disappear. Consider this: What is the

main problem that Elijah identified? He faithfully served the Lord, and God had not taken away the person who is still trying to kill him!

GOD'S SERVICE TO ELIJAH

So how does God serve Elijah in his great need? Read 1 Kings 19:5, 6;7,8;9;11,12;18.

- God sent the angel of the Lord to give him food. Have you ever lost your appetite when you're feeling depressed?
- God sent him on a journey. Have you ever felt like you've lost your purpose?
- God asked him a simple question: What are you doing here? Have you ever felt lost in your own thoughts, and a simple question brought it all out?
- God showed him his great power but came to him in a gentle whisper. He reminded Elijah of his gentle love. Have you ever needed to be put in your place when you feel that your problems are too big for God, only to be picked up by the quiet care of someone?
- God assured him that he was not alone. Have you ever needed the reminder that there are people who love you and are standing with you?

Maybe Elijah's story is a story just for you because God didn't take away what Elijah perceived to be his biggest problem. Instead he used Elijah's identified problem—the thing that drove him to the depths—in order to pick him back up and give him hope, purpose, and the companionship of those who remained faithful. With that in mind,

COMPLETE THIS SENTENCE:

This Bible account shows me that God is _____ FOR ME.

There is help for you if you suffer from depression. The help you need may be professional help. Seek out that help! And as you do, know that God is there with you in the most unexpected ways through the most unexpected people. Even in this dark place, he is there.



Contributing editor Gregory Lyon, campus pastor at Wisconsin Lutheran College, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is a member at Pilgrim, Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin.

This is the third article in a six-part series on applying biblical narratives to our lives.

LEARN MORE AT > forwardinchrist.net, including additional food for thought and potential answers.

COMMUNITY

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THINGS TO NOTE

CHANGES IN MINISTRY

Pastors

Bitter, Mark, to retirement

Dolan, Timothy, to Immanuel, Greenville, Wis.

Habben, Daniel, to Mt. Calvary, Flagstaff, Ariz.

Rose, Frank, to Grace, Vail, Ariz.

Schumann, Daniel, to Shepherd of the Hills, Winchester, Va.

Smith, Robert, to Our Savior, Sun City, Ariz.

Westenberg, Douglas, to St. Michael's, Fountain City, Wis.

Wiesenauer, Stephen, to One Asia Team

Zahn, Larry, to Ascension, Crossville, Tenn.

Teachers

Berger, Paul, to Christ Alone, Thiensville, Wis.

Boche, Jonathan, to Kingdom Prep Lutheran High School, Milwaukee, Wis.

Carlovsky, Elizabeth, to St. John, Milwaukee, Wis.

Clough, Chad, to St. Paul, Franklin, Wis.

Dannecker, Holly, to St. Mark, Green Bay, Wis.

Hill, Marlee, to Good Shepherd, West Bend, Wis.

Hurley, Karilyn, to Divine Savior, Liberty Hill, Texas

Hurley, Patrick, to Divine Savior, Liberty Hill, Texas

Hutchinson, Ethan, to Shoreland Lutheran High School, Somers, Wis.

Janke, Peggy, to Jesus' Lambs of Grace, Manitowoc, Wis.

Klismeyer, Ahnsharee, to Good Shepherd's, West Allis, Wis.

Lehman, Steven, to St. Paul, Menomonie, Wis.

Liepert, Justin, to Wisconsin Lutheran High School, Milwaukee, Wis.

Olson, Andrew, to Emmanuel, Tempe, Ariz.

Patterson, Paul, to Commission on Lutheran Schools, Waukesha, Wis.

Plath, Daniel, to St. Paul, Beverly Hills, Fla.

Prater, Megan, to St. Paul, Lake Mills, Wis.

Prost, Brooke, to Divine Savior Lutheran Academy, Doral, Fla.

Ring, David, to Wisconsin Lutheran School, Racine, Wis.

Rothe, Hannah, to St. Paul, Rapid City, S.D.

Rothe, Luke, to St. Marcus, Milwaukee, Wis.

Schmidt, Joshua, to St. Luke, Oakfield, Wis.

Scriber, Melissa, to Christ-St. John's, West Salem, Wis.

Smith, LaShawn, to Jesus Loves Me Learning Center, North Mankato, Minn.

Vance, Duane, to Illinois Lutheran Schools Inc., Crete, Ill.

Veith, Rachel, to St. John, Watertown, Wis.

Wells, Benjamin, to Arizona Lutheran Academy, Phoenix, Ariz.

Zabel, Hannah, to Peace, Kissimmee, Fla.

Staff ministers

Krueger, Amy, to retirement

Thiesfeldt, Andrew, to Immanuel, Greenville, Wis.

ANNIVERSARIES

Appleton, Wis.—Riverview (75). March 8. Worship, 8 & 10:30 A.M. 920-733-3728.

North Fort Myers, Fla.—Bethany (50). March 22. Worship, 4 P.M.; catered meal follows. RSVP, revagumm@hotmail.com.
Abita Springs, La.—Trinity (115). April 5. Worship, 10 A.M.; free community meal follows. freesepts@gmail.com.

San Jose, Calif.—Apostles Lutheran School (50). April 25–26. April 25. Evening gala to include catered dinner, dance, raffle, and fellowship. April 26. Worship, 8:45 A.M. RSVP, schooladm@apostlessj.org.

Winona, Minn.—St. Matthew's (100). June 6–7. June 6. Commemoration of the adoption of the constitution and cornerstone laying of the church and school, 6 P.M. June 7. Worship, 9 A.M., community outreach celebration and outdoor picnic follows. 507-454-5440.

COMING EVENTS

Martin Luther College choir tour—Website, mlc-wels.edu.

THROUGH MY *Bible* IN 3 YEARS

- | | | |
|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Genesis 6 | 12. Gen. 21:22–22:24 | 23. Lk. 11:53–12:12 |
| 2. Gen. 7:1–8:19 | 13. Gen. 23 | 24. Lk. 12:13–34 |
| 3. Gen. 8:20–9:29 | 14. Gen. 24:1–60 | 25. Lk. 12:35–59 |
| 4. Gen. 10:1–11:9 | 15. Gen. 24:61–25:34 | 26. Lk. 13:1–17 |
| 5. Gen. 11:10–13:4 | 16. Gen. 26 | 27. Lk. 13:18–35 |
| 6. Gen. 13:5–14:24 | 17. Luke 9:57–10:12 | 28. Lk. 14:1–24 |
| 7. Gen. 15 | 18. Lk. 10:13–24 | 29. Lk. 14:25–35 |
| 8. Gen. 16, 17 | 19. Lk. 10:25–42 | 30. Lk. 15 |
| 9. Gen. 18 | 20. Lk. 11:1–13 | 31. Lk. 16:1–31 |
| 10. Gen. 19 | 21. Lk. 11:14–36 | |
| 11. Gen. 20:1–21:21 | 22. Lk. 11:37–52 | |

MARCH 2020

READ MORE AT wels.net/bible3

REACTION TO FIC'S REDESIGN



We have received many comments about the new Forward in Christ magazine, including several on readability. A few of the comments are below. We have

slightly increased the font size in this issue and are continuing to examine all aspects of the magazine so that we can provide the best magazine to our current and future subscribers. Thank you for taking the time to write in.

We say yes, yes, yes to all that was new in our January issue of FIC! An update was needed, but you certainly covered every possible improvement. The choice of paper and your use of color in various areas were great. Important articles to extend outreach to others were "This is WELS," "Explore more," and "Parent conversations." There was needed emphasis for youth addressed in "Explore more," "New selfie," and "Life after abortion." I like the style of the John Braun picture.

Occasionally, it would be nice to have articles written by laypeople as in "Parent conversations." There are hundreds of thousands living outside the Milwaukee-Watertown, New Ulm, Saginaw, Fox Valley areas that have a lot to offer.

Kathryn | Baraboo, Wisconsin

Just read your new FIC with a new design. Loved the articles. They are a bit different, but all of the information and method of presentation was interesting and kept me turning the pages to see what was coming next.

My only complaint was that the print is very hard for me to read, I think it is too soft, or maybe the font and color are too vague. It isn't clean, clear and crisp. The older we get the more difficult it is to read the written word.

Thank you for making this all available.

Lydia Falk | Victoria, Texas

The layout of the new design is lovely, and as always, the content superb, but I find the print not bold enough and slightly smaller than previously, thus harder to read.

Anne Brannan | Seattle, Washington

Send letters to *Forward in Christ*, N16W23377 Stone Ridge Dr, Waukesha WI 53188; ficsubmissions@wels.net. Letters are edited for clarity, conciseness, and relevance. Writers' views are not necessarily those of WELS or *Forward in Christ*.

- March 1, 10:30 A.M., Sola Fide, Lawrenceville, Ga.; 6:30 P.M., Abiding Peace, Simpsonville, S.C.
- March 2, 7 P.M., Risen Savior, Pooler, Ga.
- March 3, 7 P.M., King of Kings, Maitland, Fla.
- March 4, 7 P.M., Divine Savior, West Palm Beach, Fla.
- March 5, 10:30 A.M., Divine Savior Academy, Doral, Fla.
- March 6, 7 P.M., Crown of Life, Ft. Myers, Fla.
- March 7, 7 P.M., St. Paul, Beverly Hills, Fla.
- March 8, 9:30 A.M., Open Bible, Oxford, Fla.
- March 22, 3 P.M., Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn.

Pathways to Christ retreat—March 13–15. Oshkosh, Wis. Theme, "A friend loves at all times." Website, pathwaystochrist.org. 920-233-1069.

Christian Woman Today retreat—March 20–22. Sheraton Milwaukee Brookfield Hotel, Brookfield, Wis. Theme: "Taste and see that the Lord is good." Website, christianwomantoday.org. 414-507-5341.

Ironmen of God conference—March 21. St. Paul's, Ixonia, Wis. Website, ironmenofgodwi.org.

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Chorus tour—Website, wls.wels.net.

- April 9, 6:30 P.M., Cross of Christ, Boise, Idaho.

- April 10, 7 P.M., Holy Trinity, Des Moines, Wash.
- April 11, 7 P.M., Grace, Portland, Ore.
- April 12, 10 A.M., Immanuel, Salem, Ore.; 7:30 P.M., Mt. Calvary, Redding, Calif.
- April 13, 7 P.M., St. Mark, Citrus Heights, Calif.
- April 14, 7 P.M., Our Redeemer, Santa Barbara, Calif.
- April 15, 7 P.M., Gethsemane, Los Angeles, Calif.
- April 16, 7 P.M., Beautiful Savior, Carlsbad, Calif.
- April 17, 6:30 P.M., Risen Savior, Chula Vista, Calif.
- April 18, 7:30 P.M., Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn.
- April 19, 10:30 A.M., St. Peter, St. Peter, Minn.

WELS Coulee women's retreat—April 17–19. Cranberry Country Lodge, Tomah, Wis. Website, facebook.com/groups/WCWR2020. welscwr@gmail.com; 608-855-0185.

WELS women writers conference—April 24–25. Trinity, Waukesha, Wis. Hosted by WELS Women's Ministry and Northwestern Publishing House. Register now. Website, wm.welsrc.net/wels-women-writers-conference.

To place an announcement, call 414-256-3210 or e-mail ficsubmissions@wels.net. Deadline is eight weeks before publication date.

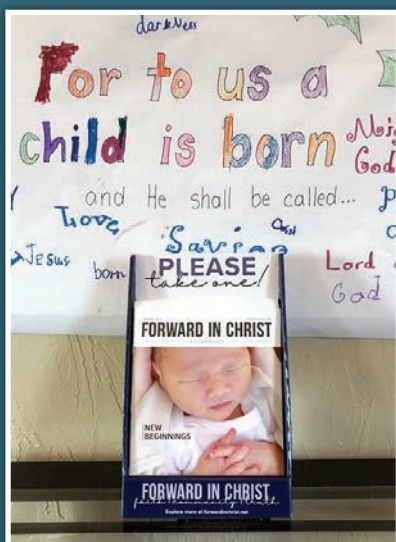
SEE MORE AT welsrc.net/bulletinboard.

SEEN ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Gunnar Ledermann, pastor at Divine Peace, Rockwall, Texas, highlighted his congregation's new display holder on the church's Instagram page:

☺📖 Divine Peace Church Rockwall is ready with the new January issue!

How are you using *Forward in Christ* in your congregation? What about your church's new display holder? Let us know or post photos on your church's Instagram account. Tag us! [@ficondisplay](https://www.instagram.com/ficondisplay) [@forward_in_christ_magazine](https://www.instagram.com/forward_in_christ_magazine)



“A man with unclean lips”

Glenn L. Schwanke

The word “hell” keeps popping up in my reading these days. No, I’m not talking about my daily study of Scripture. I’m talking about the news-feeds on my smartphone. These days, authors seem to think it shows great intelligence to throw prepositional phrases like “What in the h—!” into otherwise innocuous articles on ice fishing or sugar-cookie recipes.

Even the headlines of articles may contain words that blushing editors used to mask with strange, code-like rendering: “*!%#.” Not anymore. Had I used such words as a child, I would have savored a bar of Lifebuoy soap lodged firmly in my mouth during a monthlong time-out!

Look to Christ’s cross whenever your unclean lips trouble you.

Today we dwell among a people with unclean lips, who toss obscenities around as if hurling verbal hand grenades is the only way to gain a reader’s attention or perhaps even garner respect for how cutting-edge the writer has dared to be!

You and I are not immune to such language. A quick check of Facebook reveals cringeworthy examples of believers who—perhaps to blend in with everyone else—toss words around that make a mother weep and sadden our heavenly Father (Colossians 3:8).

Ah, but it’s easy to train the scope of my law-sights on the unclean lips of others. It’s quite another thing to admit, “I am a man with unclean lips.” Maybe my lips are not unclean because of profanity-laced tirades, but they are unclean, nevertheless. Unclean because of a late-night phone call when someone just needed me to listen and care. Instead I spoke too soon. I said too much. My speech wasn’t seasoned with the salt of Scripture (Colossians 4:6). I ignored the

divine advice given by James, “Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry” (James 1:19).

“I am a man with unclean lips.” Isaiah confessed when he saw “the Lord sitting on a throne, high and exalted,” flanked by his seraphim honor-guard (Isaiah 6:1,2). The seraph’s shout, “Holy, holy, holy,” shook not only the foundations of heaven, but the prophet as well! “I am doomed!” Isaiah cried. “I am ruined, because I am a man with unclean lips, and I dwell among a people with unclean lips, and because my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of Armies!” (Isaiah 6:5)

Isaiah knew what we must know. The consequences of unclean lips go much further than a bar of Lifebuoy soap. As Jesus himself observed, unclean lips reflect a septic condition deep down in the soul (Mark 7:20-23). Therefore no one with unclean lips—not me, not you, not the prophet himself—dare stand in the presence of the One who is “holy, holy, holy.” All we unclean sinners deserve is hell.

In his vision, Isaiah’s dread was stilled by a seraph who took a glowing coal from the altar, touched the prophet’s mouth, and said, “Look, this has touched your lips, so your guilt is taken away, and your sin is forgiven” (Isaiah 6:7). But what shall be done with our dread and guilt? We have the center cross on Calvary’s Hill!

Look to Christ’s cross whenever your unclean lips trouble you. Find comfort in knowing “the blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7).



Contributing editor Glenn Schwanke, pastor at Peace, Houghton, Michigan, also serves as campus pastor at Michigan Technological University.

The Scripture references used in this article are from the Evangelical Heritage Version.

1 Peter 1:3



Celebrate
your living hope!

When Christians are confirmed, we celebrate the hope we have in Jesus through his resurrection. As we promise to remain faithful to God, we rejoice in that hope and praise the One who keeps us firm in that faith. This spring, give a confirmand a lasting reminder of their faith with the cherished titles from Northwestern Publishing House below.

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The Lord Bless You

At the end of worship services, the pastor often gives a special blessing: "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord look on you with favor and give you peace." Share the uplifting message of these familiar words with *The Lord Bless You*. The special gift book takes a detailed look at the words of this blessing, providing lifelong encouragement to the confirmand in your life.

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Dust you are

The smudged ashes announce that our story
does not end in the dust of death. | Peter A. Panitzke

LOOK HUNDREDS OF people in the eye and tell them that they are going to die. The message of death applies to all:

- The elderly: “Dust you are . . .”
- The man whose spouse has just died: “Dust you are . . .”
- The woman battling cancer: “Dust you are . . .”
- The smallest child: “Dust you are . . .”
- My own wife: “Dust you are . . .”

Ashes are smeared on the forehead or hand. Tears well up in my eyes and the eyes of others.

“Dust you are and to dust you will return” (Genesis 3:19).

CHOOSING DEATH

The line is long. It stretches from our altar, around the world, and across 10 centuries. Since the 900s, Christians have lined up on Ash Wednesday to receive this symbol of mortality. The ashes indicate the confession of men, women, and children: “Adam and Eve chose death, and so have I.”

“Dust you are and to dust you will return.”

Yet there is hope in this somber moment. Those smudged ashes are from last year’s Palm Sunday palm fronds.

The Son of David chose death that day. The crowds didn’t know it; the

King did. He did not choose death by sinning. He chose death by loving. He loved the crowds who loved him. He loved his enemies who hated him. Jesus chose death willingly for us.

The King stands with us in the long line. “Dust you are and to dust you will return.”

CLAIMING VICTORY

But Jesus breaks the pattern! Jesus’ story did not end in dust. God had foretold that his body would not see decay (Psalm 16:10). His body would rise triumphant from the grave. “After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied” (Isaiah 53:11).

Claim the victory of the cross again.

By receiving the sign of the cross, we confess that we will die, but we also claim Jesus’ victory for ourselves. We confess with Job: “I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my own flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another” (Job 19:25-27).

The smudged ashes announce that our story also does not end in the dust of death. Just as Jesus’ body came out of the grave, so shall ours.

Death is changed to a sleep from which we shall awaken—refreshed,

new, joyful, without a care in the world. With Job we cry out, “How my heart yearns within me!” (Job 19:27).

“Dust you are and to dust you will return.”

The smudged Ash Wednesday crosses on our foreheads are often faint or lopsided. Isn’t that a symbol too? They are imperfect. We are still imperfect here. We look forward to life and joy as Job did.

That’s why we gather during the Lenten season. Watch carefully the events of Holy Week. See the King choose death for you. In spirit, go to the tomb to see that his body did not become dust. Claim the victory of the cross again.

“Pastor, dip your thumb into the ashes again. Trace that sign of the cross once more on my forehead or my hand. Let me treasure it in my heart as well.”

Receive the sign of the cross this Lenten season.



Peter Panitzke is pastor at
St. Paul, Muskego, Wisconsin.

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