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*Through the Year with Jimmy Carter*

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## INTRODUCTION

Many centuries ago a wise author warned, “Of making many books there is no end” (Ecclesiastes 12:12). While I’m not sure how many books *he* wrote, I’m pretty sure that, unless I’ve lost count, *Through the Year with Jimmy Carter* is my twenty-sixth. That’s a lot of books!

But this one is special.

For one thing, it’s a devotional. I hope it encourages you to grow deeper in your Christian faith and to experience more of what Christ has for you, regardless of where you might be on life’s journey. I’m just a few months shy of my eighty-seventh birthday, and I have to admit that the Lord has brought me on a very different kind of journey than the one I thought was beginning on a farm near Plains, Georgia, during the Great Depression. None of us can know where our journeys with God will take us even tomorrow—let alone a decade from now—so it’s a good idea to spend a few moments each day to connect with God and ask, “Well, where do you want to take me today?”

The Bible tells us that a man named Enoch “walked faithfully with God” for three hundred *years*, until one day God simply “took him away” (Genesis 5:24). It’s nice to assume that the pair got to know each other so well that when one walk went a little long one evening, God said, “Hey, it’s late. Why don’t you just come over to my place?” Daily walks are good for creating that kind of close friendship, and I hope that this devotional might help you to draw nearer to God in a similar way.

Each page is based on a different Sunday school lesson I’ve taught, either while president or at Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains. The earliest entry comes from a class in 1977, and the most recent from one in June 2011 (the dates are noted at the top of each page). Sometimes the entries mention historic events, such as the Camp David Accords of 1978; at other times I refer to some personal incident from my boyhood or family life; and in still other entries I simply focus on a Bible verse or passage and try to suggest how it might apply to our lives today. But in every case my goal is to interact faithfully with the wisdom in God’s Word in order to encourage and promote fresh thinking that moves both our hearts and minds closer to the Savior.

Since the book covers a lot of historical, biblical, and personal territory,

I've divided it into four sections. In the first, "Launching," we'll take a look at some of the foundations of our Christian faith, because we need to have a solid grasp of the essentials if we want to launch successfully into the great adventure God has waiting for us. In the second, "Growing," we'll consider how to build on the foundation to grow into the kind of Christians who both enjoy life and bless others. In the third, "Serving," we'll explore how the Spirit of Christ inevitably draws us into a life of service, not to constrict our lives, but to expand and liberate our hearts and enlarge the kingdom of God. In the fourth, "Maturing," we'll ponder the radical influence for good that mature followers of Christ can have on our families, friends, neighborhoods, and world—for the glory of God and the benefit of the people God has made.

If there is one theme that keeps reappearing in these devotions, it's that God calls us to live out our faith. I don't know what that might mean to you, but I do know that Jesus asks us to listen to his words and then to act on them. Rosalynn and I read the Bible together every night. I teach Sunday school, write books about my religious faith, listen to sermons, debate with theologians, and teach classes in the Departments of Theology and Religion at Emory University. I would put all those things under the category of "hearing." They are just words—spoken words, written words, words listened to and, perhaps, nothing else.

It is good if we hear Jesus' words, but we must not take pride and become complacent in that achievement. We must also *live* by his words, which may mean taking a hard look at ourselves and asking, "What keeps me from being a devoted doer of his words?"

We can do so every day, as we follow a path to peace, harmony, gratification, and real success in the eyes of God.

PART I  
LAUNCHING

As the only president who served in submarines, I was especially honored in 2004 when the USS *Jimmy Carter* was launched. We prayed that this unique naval vessel would be an instrument for peace and harmony among nations.

Launching a ship and launching a Christian life have many things in common. The transformation of a ship from resting in a building dock to immersion in the sea is perhaps the most significant moment in her life; but every other step is crucial, including design, creation, and testing in action.

In a similar way, to enjoy a successful Christian life and effectively launch out into the grand adventure to which God calls us, we need to lay a proper foundation, build with the right materials, and have a good idea of our ultimate mission. In this first section, we'll focus on many key building blocks of a thriving Christian experience. We'll ponder a God-centered life, rejoice in God's love, meditate on grace and faith, consider the ongoing need for confession and repentance, discuss the fundamental role of Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection, and look forward to eternity with him.

When we prepare and build well, we set ourselves up for a thrilling launch into a successful Christian life. Who knows what wonderful opportunities and awesome challenges await us on our life's journey with God? When properly built, we can be ready for anything that comes our way. God urges you and me to build our whole lives on his Son, Jesus Christ, whom the Bible calls our foundation.

"For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11).



## Whom Do You Trust?

*Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God.*

PSALM 146:5

Even our dearest loved ones and most trusted friends can't provide for us a firm foundation throughout our lives, because unpredictable circumstances can always intervene. That is why this psalm urges us to put our hope in God, who is a permanent and all-knowing partner and whose plans never perish. If we're looking for a repository of confidence—someone in whom to put our faith—then we must look to God, the Creator of the universe and the one who gave us life.

Too often, unfortunately, we don't turn to God. Instead, we put our trust in politicians or bankers or business partners or family members. Or we turn to money and say, "If I could just hit the lottery and win five million bucks, then all my troubles would be over." But those are false hopes.

Some of the richest people in America, who make several million dollars a year acting in movies or recording songs or playing sports, often wind up in jail or land on skid row after becoming addicted to drugs or alcohol. Some lose their families or reputation because of misconduct. This should be very sobering to us. We tend to think that money and fame and the adulation of others will make us happy—but we come to realize that those things are not foundations for real success. Material things can always let us down, even (maybe especially) the things that make lavish promises. But God never will.

The Holy Word urges us to turn to God first and place our trust in Christ. For good reason the Bible says, "He remains faithful forever" (Psalm 146:6). Who else can make that staggering claim? Or more to the point, who else has made good on that promise?

*O God, help me see more clearly that you truly are my only foundation for hope. When life drags me down and I feel abandoned, give me the firm conviction that you are with me, both now and always. And, Lord, enable me to share this good news with others, that they too may place their hope in you. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen. ✠*

## God Keeps His Promises

*I will not violate my covenant  
or alter what my lips have uttered.*

PSALM 89:34

Even the most powerful people on earth don't always keep their promises. Unfortunately, United States presidents are no exception. Woodrow Wilson, for example, promised that he would not go to war and was elected because of that promise. But later on, several changes prompted Wilson to violate his promise and enter World War I.

President Eisenhower made a public statement to Soviet leaders in 1960 that we did not have surveillance planes flying over Russian missile sites. Shortly after this, one of our U-2 spy planes had been shot down and the pilot, Francis Gary Powers, was captured. The Soviets provided firm proof that Eisenhower had lied, which deeply embarrassed our nation.

High government officials told many lies to the American people during the Vietnam War. More recently, President George H. W. Bush made a public promise that he would not introduce any new taxes. He boldly stated, "Read my lips: No new taxes." But he ended up approving new taxes, and so lost his reelection bid.

Good and honest people sometimes have to break promises because of changing circumstances or after acquiring new information.

I made every effort to keep the pledge I had made to the American people that I would not lie or make a misleading statement. I also promised that I would try to stay at peace, and even though we had a lot of serious challenges while I was president, we never dropped a bomb, fired a missile, or shot a bullet in combat. Still, I was not able to keep 100 percent of my campaign promises.

God Almighty, our Creator, *always* keeps his promises. God never lies and always remains in control. The Scripture says, "I will not violate my covenant or alter what my lips have uttered." Those lips, we can believe. Always.

*Dear God, it gives me a deep sense of assurance to know that you always stand by your Word, never recant anything you say, and never forget promises you have made. Help me be a person of my word, so that others can depend on me because I belong to you. Make me a blessing to those around me. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen. ✠*

## An Unchanging Promise

*Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it."*

NUMBERS 13:30

As an American who has been president of the United States, I would like to say that the values of our country don't change. But they do.

The Supreme Court interprets basic issues in various ways at different times. Authorization for the death penalty comes and goes, and now it is permitted in thirty-five states. The United States has a higher portion of citizens in jail than any other nation, a result of severe prison sentences. (Civil liberties have been restricted since 9/11.) Our rapidly changing times make me glad for the never-changing promises of God, in which Caleb believed.

Out of more than a million Israelites who had fled Egypt and were waiting at the edge of Canaan to inherit their new land, Caleb was one of only two who actually would go in and dwell there. Ten of the spies whom Moses sent into Canaan to survey the land said, "We can't take it because it's inhabited by giants. There's no hope!" But Caleb told the truth. With courage and faith he replied, "With God's support, we can indeed take the promised land." Because Caleb believed God, Moses said to him, "The land on which your feet have walked will be your inheritance and that of your children forever, because you have followed the LORD my God wholeheartedly" (Joshua 14:9). That land ended up being Hebron, where Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob lived and are buried. Caleb believed God's promise, and so inherited the Promised Land.

While all else may change, God's promises remain firm. The most important was that Jesus would come as the Messiah. And when we build our lives on this bedrock promise, it gives stability and confidence to all our days.

*O Lord, laws and customs change so often that sometimes it seems that I wake up to a different country every morning. I am thankful for your Word and for the unchanging promises it contains. Teach me how to build my life on your Word so I can successfully navigate my way through this world, for your glory. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. ✠*

## At the Core

*“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”*

MATTHEW 5:17

What would you identify as the core of your existence? On what foundation do you build your life?

Christ says that he came to fulfill Moses' laws and the words of the prophets, not to change them. Jesus had just shaken up the crowd (and deeply disturbed his own disciples) by speaking what we know as the Beatitudes. But he insisted, “I am not a new Moses.” He had not descended from Mount Sinai with a new set of commandments. His life on earth, as the promised Messiah, was a fulfillment of ancient Scriptures—an explanation of their meaning and of the character of God.

The Bible is unchanging and eternally valid, as the apostle Paul recognized. In his far-flung missionary journeys, Paul always tried to convince people that his message fully agreed with the Hebrew Scriptures. Trends and human customs may come and go, but the Word of God endures forever. Until the kingdom of God arrives in its fullness, nothing in Scripture will be changed or forgotten. There's a permanence about it. How important this is as we search out the core meaning of our lives!

We don't want that core to change constantly, but to remain stable, predictable, and secure. We want an unshakable foundation for our existence. And here Christ tells us that we have such a solid foundation—Holy Scripture—on which to build our lives. Nothing can ruin it. War can't alter it. The loss of our loved ones can't devastate it. Failure in business can't demolish it. Bankruptcy can't wipe it out. Not even death can destroy it.

If we want a solid core, a firm foundation, around which to build our lives, then we must choose the Word of God. When everything else falls to the ground, it alone will remain standing.

*O Lord, when changing times and shifting circumstances threaten to undo me, help me remember that you have given us your Holy Word to serve as an anchor and an unchanging foundation for my life. Give me the wisdom to search its depths and the courage to act on what it says—as did both Jesus and Paul. In Christ's name I pray. Amen. ✠*

## Awestruck by the Glory of God

*When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."*

JOHN 11:4

It's hard to believe that God let Lazarus die just so Jesus could perform a miracle of resuscitation, or that the Lord made a man blind just so Jesus could heal him (see John 9). But it is certain that these sad cases provided special opportunities for Jesus to demonstrate the power and love of God, the Creator of the universe.

A man had died, and Jesus raised him. A man couldn't see, and Jesus gave him sight. Through these curing miracles, God's glory shone forth, giving us the opportunity to recognize that glory and to accept Jesus as Savior. John explains why he recorded these miracles: "that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). We don't have to know *how* the miracles were done or explain all that happens in Scripture. We simply must recognize the truths about God and his Son, Jesus Christ.

When Jewish religious leaders questioned the formerly blind man and accused Jesus of being a sinner, the man replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" (John 9:25). In effect, he was saying, "Hey, I'm no theologian. I don't know how to analyze Scriptures or interpret the prophets. All I know is that a miracle has happened to me."

We too can have faith in Jesus Christ, based on the Bible's simple accounts of his life and ministry. When we read of these miracles, we too can witness the power and glory of God—and respond to the Lord in awe and wonder.

*O Lord, despite the familiarity of these stories, help me feel their impact and revel in your glory, as revealed by these amazing miracles. Bring to my heart the unshakable conviction that the same Jesus who raised the dead and gave sight to the blind wants to be present in my heart, bringing full and joyful lives to those around me. I pray in Jesus' glorious name. Amen. ✠*

## An Encounter with God

*He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth,  
with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were  
ascending and descending on it.*

GENESIS 28:12

Whenever I got sick as a child, I knew that in addition to my aches and pains, I also would be afflicted with a nightmare. A rabid dog, foaming at the mouth, always chased me. I tried to run, but my feet could hardly move. The dog drew closer and closer, and just as he started to bite, I'd wake up in a cold sweat.

Later, when I became prominent and began making speeches, I had a different bad dream. In this one, I couldn't find anything to wear. I searched high and low, but my clothes were all in rags or covered with oil. Sometimes I could find no clothes at all.

Jacob also had a dream, but it was no nightmare; it was a confrontation with God. In a place called Beersheba, he dreamed about a ladder reaching to heaven, with angels climbing up and down on it. The Lord suddenly appeared to him and said, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac" (Genesis 28:13).

Before this, Jacob had been interested only in himself. But now, in this strange dream, God reaffirmed the covenant made with Abraham. Although Jacob didn't deserve it—after a lifetime of lies and deceit—God reached out to him, loved him, and said, in effect, "I will protect you for the rest of your life."

We all share something of Jacob's position. We all are sinful and looking out for ourselves. Even so, God has reached out to us and told us that if we believe in Christ, we will be saved, and nothing can separate us from God. *That* is protection. *That* is security. And that is all ours in Christ.

*O God, thank you for including me, through Christ, in the blessing of the covenant made with Abraham and reaffirmed to Jacob. And thank you for reminding me that while I can do nothing to earn your forgiveness and blessing, I still have a responsibility to obey your commandments and to strive to model my life after that of your perfect Son, Jesus Christ, in whose name I pray. Amen. ✠*

## God's Covenant

*"This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."*

HEBREWS 8:10

How would we distinguish between a modern-day contract and God's ancient covenant? For one thing, in a contract, two or more human beings come together looking for mutual advantage. They study a situation, negotiate, and finally say, "We've reached an agreement." Contracts usually concern money, property, or services.

I recently bought sixteen acres of land from a fellow church member. It was to her advantage to sell it because she wanted the money and didn't need the land. It was to my advantage to buy it because I wanted to expand my fish farm. Also, my father used to own that land, and I wanted some of it back. So Carol and I drew up a contract, now recorded in the courthouse. I have a deed to the land, while she has my money; a reasonable amount of cash for a reasonable amount of land.

When a dispute occurs or a contract gets violated, lawyers get involved and a court decides the matter. The law levies penalties against a person who breaks a contract.

All this differs markedly from God's covenant. Abraham didn't approach God and say, "Let's negotiate a covenant." No, God came to Abraham and said, "This is what I have to offer you. I see you are loyal and have faith in me, and now I will give you special status and privileges." The covenant depended on God's ability to keep his word, and on Abraham's faith.

With faith, we Christians inherited God's covenant with Abraham and also the final covenant, an intimate relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Through it, God has promised us eternal, abundant life. And God does not lie.

*O God, I am thankful that through your grace and love you offered to Abraham—and to me—your covenant of forgiveness and reconciliation. Although it is free and I cannot earn this blessing, give me the will to serve you faithfully, with the help of the Holy Spirit. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen. ✠*

## Who's Lucky?

*Then King David went in and sat before the LORD, and he said:  
 "Who am I, Sovereign LORD, and what is my family, that you have  
 brought me this far?"*

2 SAMUEL 7:18

David felt stunned. Already God had done so much for him, and now the Lord promised to exalt both him and his family. The Messiah would come as David's descendant and rule forever.

David erupted in praise, awed and humbled by the grace of God. David recognized, as often we do not, that the great things he had accomplished—killing Goliath, defeating the Philistines, uniting Israel—were relatively insignificant in the overall plan of God. Although he was special and had won great honors, he recognized all these as relatively small things compared to this newest honor. David knew that he owed everything to God.

God also has blessed us, through Jesus Christ, in countless ways. Yet how often do we give God the credit? We don't see all our blessings—freedom, good health, security, and prosperity—as coming from the good hand of God. The fact is, no matter what we have done in the name of Christ to further God's kingdom, chances are that we have done nothing that tops the deeds of King David—and David looked upon his life's achievements as relatively insignificant in the big picture. So what does that mean for us?

God has chosen to use us. God gives us strength and judgment and opportunities to serve in our own way. God has done infinitely more for us than we have done for God, so self-congratulation and pride are, quite simply, stupid. If we think God is lucky to have us, then we are deceived. Even though everything we do in life is just a blip on the timeline of history, it can be important in God's kingdom. *All of it* is made possible by our Creator, who gives us the strength that those good deeds require.

*Dear Lord, thank you for the countless benefits you send my way every day—sunshine, rain, and life itself. Teach me to ask myself, as the apostle did, "What do I have that I did not receive?" The answer, of course, is "nothing." Help me remember this and, like David, give you passionate thanks and praise. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen. ☛*

## Trust That God Is in Control

*Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go."*

JUDGES 4:8

A remarkable woman named Deborah served as Israel's judge during the time the nation languished under the harsh rule of Canaanite king Jabin, whose military commander, Sisera, was both cruel and oppressive. He had a powerful force of nine hundred iron chariots. When the Israelites asked God for rescue, Deborah sent for a man named Barak and told him that God had called him to muster troops and fight Sisera. God would bring Sisera into a wadi and allow Barak to defeat him. But Barak said to Deborah, "If you don't go with me, I'm not going." So Deborah agreed to go but predicted that the fearful Barak would get no glory; instead, Sisera would die at the hands of a woman.

A wadi is a draining area for a riverbed. It is normally dry but can become a roaring torrent when it rains—a dangerous place to be. When Sisera heard about Barak's troop movement, he got his army, including his iron chariots, and rushed into the wadi. Barak attacked, and God brought down torrents of rain, flooding the chariots and bogging them down in mud. Barak's army overcame the enemy, but General Sisera escaped and fled to the home of a friend named Heber. Heber's wife gave Sisera food and drink and a place to sleep. But while he slept, she got a hammer and drove a spike through his head—thus fulfilling Deborah's prediction.

Our lesson is this: We should never be afraid to step out in faith and trust God's promise. That is what Deborah did and what Barak refused to do without Deborah holding his hand. We can take risks and be bold in our service to God when we trust that the Lord is in control.

*O God, may the story of Deborah and Barak encourage me and fill me with faith in you. As a Christian, I know I am bound by your covenant, through my faith in Jesus, as were Abraham, Moses, and Deborah. Give me renewed inspiration and confidence as I honor my promises to you as a follower of Jesus Christ, in whose name I pray. Amen. ✝*

## God's Plan

*"I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you."*

GENESIS 45:4 – 5

Even when we think things have gone terribly wrong, God's plans remain in effect.

In 1920, about ten thousand foreign missionaries labored in China. But in 1949 the Chinese Revolution swept Mao Zedong into power, and instantly all religious worship was banned and all foreign missionaries expelled. That situation lasted for thirty years.

Then in 1978, Deng Xiaoping, vice premier of China, and I began months of intense secret negotiations. Finally, in December, we announced normalization of diplomatic relations between China and the United States. The next month, January 1979, I invited Deng Xiaoping to visit Washington. During his visit we had long hours of discussion on many subjects. Finally, he asked if I had any special favor to ask, not included in our official talks. I asked him to give people religious freedom and allow Bibles and missionaries to return to China. He pledged to do those things, except no foreign missionaries could return.

A couple of years later on a visit to China, I found churches overrun with worshipers. In Shanghai, they held four services a day to accommodate all the new believers. They had run out of special paper for printing Bibles and the government provided the paper.

Thirty years of intense persecution under the communist regime had forced Christians to consolidate, and their faith became more intense. When they finally received a breath of fresh air, the Christian faith exploded. And still today it continues to grow by leaps and bounds.

No matter how bad things may look, we must remember that God has a plan and remains in control—always.

*O God, I admit that the divine control you exert over our world frequently doesn't look like what I expect. I appreciate stories like that of Joseph, where I see that despite bad mistakes and even disasters, you still bring about your holy will, for your glory and our benefit. Give me confidence to live boldly for you, knowing you always remain in control. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen. ✠*

## God at Work

*When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it.*

LUKE 2:41 – 43

It is easy to lose a child. When I was in the Navy in California, we were watching a Rose Bowl parade with our three-year-old son and suddenly realized that he was missing! We searched frantically in the huge crowd, and finally some people told us they saw a little boy following the parading clowns. We gave fervent thanks to God when we found him.

How could Mary and Joseph go a whole day out of Jerusalem without noticing that their son was missing? Each parent probably assumed Jesus was with the other. They searched for him in their caravan and then returned to Jerusalem and looked there. Why did it take three days before they found him in the temple?

First, Jerusalem was a good-sized city, with as many as 100,000 residents. Second, they probably didn't expect him to be in the temple. If we had a twelve-year-old son who got lost in Macon, Georgia, the *last* place we'd look would be the church! But that's where Jesus was, talking with the teachers there. And "everyone who heard him was amazed" (Luke 2:47).

When his parents found him, his mother said, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." Jesus replied, "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:48–49). His parents didn't understand his answer.

Sometimes we get so preoccupied with worldly, everyday questions we forget to consider spiritual answers. Sometimes we need to step back and consider how God might be at work even in a stressful situation.

*O Lord, help me do the same thing Jesus did when he was just twelve years old: seek a better understanding of you through the Scriptures. Remind me that you are never absent; in fact, you might be at work in a very powerful way, if I just had eyes to see. Give me those eyes, Lord. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen. ☩*

## The Real Champion

*“It is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD’s, and he will give all of you into our hands.”*

I SAMUEL 17:47

In the days of King Saul, the Philistines had grown so powerful they even threatened the existence of God’s chosen people. One day as the Philistine and Israelite armies faced each other, the enemy’s top warrior, a giant named Goliath, bellowed a challenge: “Look, our armies don’t have to kill each other. Let me represent the Philistines and you get somebody to represent your side. Whichever champion wins, gains the victory for his army.” Of course, no Israelite wanted to fight him.

At this time, David was tending his father’s sheep. His older brothers had been conscripted into Saul’s army, like other Hebrews who could fight. David’s father said to him, “Why don’t you take some food to your brothers?” So David set off to visit the front lines. When he arrived, he found all the Hebrew soldiers cowering in fear of this huge giant. So David said, “I’ll take him on.” He probably was just a teenager, and not very big, at least not like King Saul, who was “head and shoulders taller than anyone else in the country.” When his own countrymen made fun of him, David said, “I have absolute confidence, not in myself, but in God. By myself, I cannot prevail; but God, through me, can prevail over any force that threatens his people.” So David ran to the battle line and slew Goliath with a single stone from his slingshot.

We can have the same kind of confidence that energized David. So long as we keep God as our top priority, make God’s goals our own, and commit to obey the Lord through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can rest easy. For God alone is the real champion.

*Dear God, I marvel at the courage, daring, and faith of the boy David, who as a teenager willingly took on a challenge that the most seasoned veterans of Israel’s army dared not accept. I recognize that his bravery and prowess came from you, based in his ultimate confidence in your faithfulness and love. Make me bold for you, Lord, as I face formidable opponents in my own world. I pray in Jesus’ name. Amen. ✨*

## Power and Victory

*The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever."*

REVELATION 11:15

What's the most extreme punishment that we can administer to others, or fear ourselves? Physical death. We can hardly imagine how a person, guilty of a horrible crime, feels when the death sentence is handed out.

Yet in the first century, Christians faced that verdict all the time. For their faith in Christ, thousands were condemned to torture and death.

But how did such a death apply to Christ? As a victory! While sometimes we weep when we sing the old hymns describing Christ's death on the cross—even his feeling of being abandoned by God—the New Testament presents the event as a great victory over death itself.

My favorite poet is Dylan Thomas. In "Refusal to Mourn the Death by Fire of a Child in London," his last line says, "After the first death, there is no other." I don't know what Dylan Thomas's religious faith was like, but I can't forget that line.

John was trying to remind his fellow first-century Christians that while human beings can suffer physical death, nothing can separate them from Christ and the triumph of living through eternity in the presence of God. Eternal life with Christ far transcends any suffering here, in our "first life."

We cannot remove ourselves from a world of suffering and fear. That's all a part of life on this earth. But John reminds us that no power can harm our relationship with God. No power here is strong enough to alter our place in God's kingdom.

The mightiest things on earth are subservient to Christ!

*Thank you, God, for reminding me that Jesus Christ reigns over all, even over death. Although I may have to face many hardships and trials, yet through his death and resurrection Jesus can make me into a victor over everything, through faith in him. Give me the courage, Lord, to live for you, with the vision of Jesus ruling in righteousness, for all eternity—and by his grace, with me at his side. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen. ✠*

## Jesus Christ Is God

*The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible.*

COLOSSIANS 1:15 – 16

When we think about the identity of Jesus Christ, we tend to underestimate the power and majesty that should surround our Savior—his glorious and divine aura. I, at least, have that tendency. When I think about Jesus, I usually dwell more on his earthly life and character than I do his heavenly attributes. I think about him walking the dusty roads of the Holy Land, getting tired and worn out from traveling and teaching, and sometimes discouraged and frustrated from associating with “unsavory” people—the outcasts, Samaritans, lepers, tax collectors, and others who were ostracized and despised but still sought him out because in him they recognized a friend.

I think about him calling disciples from their fishing boats and later crossing the Sea of Galilee to escape the clamoring crowds and get some rest. I think about him being condemned by the powerful Jewish political and religious leaders of his day and then being betrayed by one of his own. All these things relate mostly to the human aspects of Christ’s life. But there is so much more!

Christ is supreme. Paul tells us he is “the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15). The word translated “image” in the original Greek is *eikon*, which means an exact duplicate and not a painting or reflection in a mirror. It’s a personification. Christ is the very person of God.

It is not wrong to think of Christ as human. But he also is a heavenly being, far above all others. He is God. Let us remember that staggering truth and be in awe of him and worship him as our Savior.

*O Lord, grant me a fuller and deeper understanding of Jesus Christ. When I study the Scriptures, give me new insight into your Son’s glory, and then use that insight to transform my life on earth. Lead me to a greater appreciation for my Savior’s divinity and help me transform my worship, my service, and my very existence. In Jesus’ holy name I pray. Amen. ✠*

## The Authority of Jesus

*When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. He shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?"*

MARK 5:6 – 7

Where does authority originate? Sometimes it comes from elections. Every year in our church, we cast a secret ballot of eligible men and women, and those who get the most votes become deacons for the next term of service.

Another way to get authority is by appointment. I wasn't elected to be a Sunday school teacher; a church committee appointed me to teach an adult Sunday school class. The entire cabinet of the United States government is appointed, as is the cabinet of the British government.

But there's another way to get authority, and that is to have it innately. When I was a child, our school superintendent, Miss Julia Coleman, had that kind of authority. We obeyed her not just because she was the superintendent, but because we sensed a quality within her that earned our respect. When she gave a quiet suggestion, we eagerly carried out her request. She didn't even have to threaten punishment! She taught us that authority can come from within a person.

That's the kind of authority Jesus Christ had. An aura about Jesus flowed from his divine nature as the Son of God, and it gave him authority over the lives of those with whom he came into contact. As Mark reported, even demons submitted to him. That is why the unclean spirit afflicting the man living among the tombs called Jesus "Son of the Most High God" and begged for mercy.

The Bible does not call Jesus "Lord," "Master," and "Savior" for nothing. We should recognize his divine authority and submit ourselves to him with great joy.

*God, as I acknowledge the authority of Jesus, help me willingly, eagerly, and joyfully submit to his guidance and direction. Whatever my ambitions, my unfulfilled desires, my troubles, or my challenges, let me remember that accepting Jesus into my heart and welcoming the presence of the Holy Spirit brings the assurance I need and the curative power I lack. I pray in the name of my Savior. Amen. ✠*

## Power Enough

*“Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?”*

MARK 4:40

On three separate occasions as a submarine officer, I thought I might die. Once I stood on the bridge of an old World War II submarine, with my feet only eight feet above water. As we sailed through a terrible storm, an enormous wave rose up under me and I found myself swimming in the open ocean. I've always thanked God that the ship was heading directly into the waves, because when it receded, the water carried me directly back over the submarine and I landed on top of our cannon on the main deck. I clung to it until the wave subsided, then dashed up to the bridge and lashed myself to the safety rail. If the wave had been traveling a little sideways, the submarine would have continued on without me and I would have drowned at sea.

It's horrible to sense impending death. I'm sure that's what the disciples felt during a ferocious storm on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus was sleeping, so they woke him up and asked, in effect, “Are you going to let us drown while you lie there dreaming?” Jesus got up, calmed the wind and waves, and then turned to his disciples and rebuked them for their fear prompted by a lack of faith.

Have we known such fear? Do we ever doubt God's ability to save us? God's all-encompassing power is available to us through Jesus Christ and is great enough to transcend anything that could make us afraid, powerful enough to assuage our sorrows, comprehensive enough to give us the wisdom to choose well, and generous enough to open up opportunities for Christlike action toward others.

Because the disciples had underestimated the power of Christ, they thought they were facing disaster. Let's not make the same mistake.

*O Lord, help me realize that I am truly loved, and that at all times you offer me your help and power, through the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Help me recognize this power and tap into it, and so overcome my fears, failures, losses, and sorrows. Help me erase all these through faith in my Savior, as I pray in his name. Amen. ✨*

## A Shocking Revelation

*Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said:  
“If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife  
and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a  
person cannot be my disciple.”*

LUKE 14:25 – 26

I cannot “hate” my wife and four children, our twelve grandchildren, our six great-grandchildren, or the memory of my mother and father. So what can Jesus mean in this verse?

In the original Greek, the word translated “hate” is *miseo*, which could mean “to love less,” or to put in a secondary position. Christ is saying that his followers must put their faith in him above family obligations or natural feelings of love for their closest kin. While this is easier to accept than “hate,” it’s still a difficult and even disturbing requirement. We must put *every* priority in life below our commitment to Christ. Our top priority must be to follow him, to keep his commandments, and to emulate his actions. That is a profound but greatly beneficial directive.

It gets even more profound and unsettling when Christ says his disciples must also choose to carry their cross and follow him. Ordinarily we think of carrying a cross as enduring some kind of trial. If we have a debilitating disease, we might say, “This disease is my cross to bear.” Sometimes we treat it as a self-congratulatory thing: “I’m being courageous in the face of difficult setbacks.” But that isn’t what Jesus has in mind.

In those days, when Romans gave a sentence of crucifixion, they required the condemned to carry his cross to the place of execution, thus giving the impression that the condemned both acknowledged and accepted the justice of the sentence. Christ is saying, then, that we must associate with him and acknowledge the justness of his demands. We choose to follow him and identify with him—regardless of the cost.

*God, I’m grateful that even disturbing lessons from your Word are designed to make a permanent and positive impact on my life. Teach me, in practical ways, what it means to put you first in everything I do, and then give me strength to identify with you even in situations where doing so might cost me dearly. I ask these things in Jesus’ name. Amen. ☞*

## A Shepherd Who Cares for Us

*“I am the good shepherd.  
The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”*

JOHN 10:11

When Deng Xiaoping visited the White House in 1979, he described to me the big changes about to take place in China. At that time, the state owned everything and farmers worked the communal farms together. But Deng Xiaoping decided to give Chinese farmers a small amount of land (7 percent), and on that land they could farm for themselves.

In 1981, when Rosalynn and I next visited China, this amount of land had increased to 15 percent, and the state also let farmers develop a tiny industry. They could make clay pots, repair bicycles, raise several pigs, and so forth. It began a remarkable economic transformation that swept China.

Deng Xiaoping told me that Chinese farmers wouldn't stay up all night with a sick hog that belonged to the state. But if it were theirs, they would nurse it throughout the night to make sure it survived. Chinese officials found there was a big difference between owning land or farm animals and merely tending them for someone else.

That's what Jesus had in mind when he said, “The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away” (John 10:12). Much to the contrary, Jesus called himself “the good shepherd” who “lays down his life for the sheep.”

We do not have to worry that when we get sick or lost or feeble or old, Jesus will abandon us for some better or more perfect person. There is no distinction among believers. We belong to him, and he has shown his eternal commitment to us by laying down his life for us on the cross. We are the sheep of his pasture, he is our Good Shepherd, and we will remain in his flock forever.

*O Lord, thank you for our Good Shepherd, who laid down his life for me. Help me bind myself to him more firmly, acknowledging my needs, weakness, and sinfulness, but remembering my secure and everlasting place in his flock. Let me work harmoniously with others, never abandoning the weak among us, but realizing that you call me, like Jesus, to serve others. In his name I pray. Amen. ✠*

## The Light of Life

*When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."*

JOHN 8:12

During my years in the Navy, light shaped my life. We had no satellites, so at sea we had to depend on the stars to ascertain our position. All officers had to be experts at using a sextant. We'd identify three stars, determine the altitude of each, and use the corresponding lines on a map to show us where we were. We could also use the sun and moon.

Lighthouses likewise are very important to sailors, because they're built on places of danger. When we saw the light from a lighthouse, we stayed clear to avoid running aground.

We also had to see clearly at night. Everything was kept very dark inside the ship. When I awoke at midnight to go on duty for four hours, before turning on a dim red light to find my clothes, I would put on dark goggles so my eyes would stay acclimated to the dark and I could see objects on the water's surface when I reached my post.

Since the beginning, God has used light symbolically. One of the first things he said at creation was, "Let there be light." He appeared to Moses in a bush that seemed to burn with fire. And later on, God led the Israelites out of Egypt with a pillar of fire by night.

This symbolism extends into the New Testament. When Jesus says he is the light of the world, he places himself in God's role as the source of all light. Those who believe in him will not stumble and lose their way in the darkness, but rather will be guided into new life through the light he provides. And we can live in that light, so long as we remain committed to following Christ.

*Dear Lord, thank you for illuminating my path so I may keep safe as I find my way around this dark world. Help me live as a child of the light, who spreads your love and kindness and grace wherever I go, rather than plaguing others with the darkness of selfishness or unconcern. May the light you give me, through Christ, help others to find you. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen. ✠*

## Why Do You Call Me Good?

*As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”*

MARK 10:17

This encounter is not easy to understand. Something bothered this young man so much that he ran up to Jesus and fell on his knees before him—and devout Jews did not customarily kneel at the feet of a mere rabbi. The young man then addressed Jesus in a very interesting way: “Good teacher.”

Before answering, Jesus responded with a question, a common rabbinical practice, both then and today. “Why do you call me good?” he asked. “No one is good but God alone.” In Hebrew, the word for “good” is *tov*, and people used it to refer only to God. It carried the connotation of perfection. So in effect, the young man had called Jesus “perfect teacher.” Christ, who was indeed both God and perfect, did not disavow the description; but he wanted the young man to understand the implications of his own words. And then Jesus immediately summarized the second half of the Ten Commandments, to which the young man replied, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” *Really?* The young man was essentially claiming never to have violated any of God’s commands; he was perfect, *tov*.

But Jesus knew better. He saw that the young man’s great wealth had become his god—a violation of the first commandment, to keep God first in all things—and so he tested him with instructions to sell his possessions, give the proceeds to the poor, and follow Jesus. With great sadness, the young man walked away.

It’s no good to revere the “good” Jesus and then turn away from this perfect Savior in our daily life. Is our real treasure in heaven or among the inferior things of earth? That’s equally the question for us.

*God, it is sobering to put myself in the same position as the rich young man who couldn’t put Jesus first in all things. Help me look within my own heart and identify the priorities that drive my life—and then elevate loyalty to Jesus to top place. I ask this in his name. Amen. ✠*