

March 2026 | Issue 54

BRANCHES

A Mill Lake Church
magazine

Put On Your Armour

"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also."

John 14:1-3



milllakechurch.ca

Blessed are

Those Who Mourn

pg 6

Finding Comfort When We Mourn

pg 11

From Vice to Victory

pg 18

Divisiveness vs. Diversity



HOLY WEEK

MILL LAKE CHURCH



PALM SUNDAY



MAUNDY THURSDAY



GOOD FRIDAY



EASTER

Palm Sunday 10 AM

Maundy Thursday 7 PM 'Christ in the Passover' + Communion

Good Friday 11 AM with Sovereign Grace Baptist, Gospel Fellowship Baptist and Abbotsford Vision Missional Church

Easter Sunday 10 AM Resurrection Worship Service

Dear Friends –

The story is told of Brother Lawrence, a 16th-century monk who once walked through the forest and stopped beneath a tree stripped of its leaves. As he stood there, it struck him that the same tree would soon be covered with the leaves and blossoms of spring. "Then God must be here," he said.

That realization stayed with Brother Lawrence for the rest of his life. Whether he prepared meals for the other monks, walked in nature, or knelt to pray, he carried a deep awareness of God's presence in both the ordinary and the uncertain.

Maybe today you're experiencing chaos, uncertainty, or difficult news. Or maybe life feels full and joyful. Wherever you find yourself, we all need the reminder that God is here. He promises never to leave us (Deuteronomy 31:8). His presence meets us in every season—bare branches and blossoms alike.

That truth is woven throughout this issue of *Branches*.

The stories and reflections you'll read here come from people within our own church family—individuals who have chosen to share real experiences of faith, struggle, growth, and hope. Their honesty is a gift. Their courage to be transparent invites us to see God at work, not only in their lives, but in our own.

In these pages, you'll find articles that

- inspire hope
- challenge and deepen your faith
- point you toward the transforming work of God
- encourage you to reflect Christ in everyday life.

My prayer is that as you read, you will become more aware of God's presence with you—in the kitchen, at work or school, in conversations, in quiet moments, and even in the middle of uncertainty.

Know you are loved,


Ann Griffiths

Editor



EDITOR'S MESSAGE

BRANCHES

Issue 54

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WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

Submit articles, comments & ideas to Ann Griffiths at ann@milllakechurch.ca

Submit photos and media to Leah Cobb at hello@milllakechurch.ca



To Make the Hope of Jesus Known

Join us on Facebook & Instagram
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WORSHIP EVERY SUNDAY AT 10 A.M.

You can also stream the service at
www.youtube.com/@milllakechurch4620

Mill Lake Church is affiliated with the Evangelical Free Church of Canada

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● Special Features

LET'S CONNECT!

ADULTS TOGETHER

Bible Study: Every Sunday, 9-9:45 a.m. at the church
Gospel Clarity (Mixed Bible Study): Tuesdays, 7-9 p.m. in the church lower auditorium.
This month: March 3, 10, 17, & 24.

COMMUNITY GROUPS

Contact office@milllakechurch.ca.
Interested in joining a small group? Various groups meet throughout Abbotsford.

YOUTH—GRADES 6-12

Contact Jeff Rusu at jeffrusu4@gmail.com.
Mondays, 7 p.m. in the church gym.
Follow the Instagram youth page [@mlcyouth](https://www.instagram.com/mlcyouth).
This month: March 2, 9, 16, 23, & 30.

MEN

Contact Dwayne Mitchell at dwaynemit@gmail.com.
Prayer Time: Tuesdays, 9:30 a.m. in the church lower lounge (except 2nd Tuesday of the month). This month: March 3, 17, & 24. Come for coffee and prayer
Breakfast Break: Every 2nd Tuesday of the month at JoJo's, 10 a.m. This month: March 10.
Bible Study: The 2nd & 4th Saturday, 9-10:30 a.m. at the church. This month: March 14 & 28.
Ascent Discipleship: Meets monthly, 8-11 a.m. at the church in Room 102. This month: March 21.

WOMEN

Contact: Ann Griffiths at ann@anngriffiths.com
Morning Bible Study: Wednesdays, 9:30-11:30 a.m. in the church lower auditorium. This month: March 4 (last one).
Evening Bible Study: Mondays, 6:30-8:30 p.m. in the church lower auditorium.
This month: March 2, 9, 16, & 23 (last one).
Save the Date: April 24 at 7:00 p.m.

KIDS & TOTS

Every Sunday: During worship, newborn tots to age 5 are welcome in our nursery. Kindergarten to Grade 5 kids are dismissed part way through the service to go downstairs with their teachers. Sign in at the lobby table by the nursery for either program.
Family Sundays: On the 1st Sunday of each month, when our kids stay with us through the service, activity bags are available in the lobby.

PRAYER

Afternoon Prayer: Every Thursday, 1 p.m. with the prayer & Care team in the church lower lounge.
Evening Prayer: Meets monthly on Wednesdays, 7 p.m. This month: March 18.

Finding Comfort When We Mourn

By Randy Lemke

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4).

Last month, as we began our journey through the Beatitudes, we looked at what Jesus meant when He said, "blessed are the poor in spirit." If being poor in spirit is the doorway into the kingdom, then mourning is often the first thing we experience once we step inside.

When Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted," He isn't offering a soft consolation to the casually sad or those having a rough week. He's pointing to a spiritual reality that often feels counterintuitive—God's blessing that comes through grief, but not just any grief. It is the product of being poor in spirit. It is a mourning that flows from seeing ourselves and the world as God sees us. It is the grief that emerges when we recognize our sin, our need, and our dependence on the mercy of God.

This mourning begins in the same place the first Beatitude begins. When we realize our utter spiritual bankruptcy, our hearts naturally respond with sorrow. We see how our pride, selfishness, and sin have shaped our lives and the lives of those around us. This is the kind of sorrow that opens the door to repentance. It is not a performative guilt or a superficial regret, but a deep, God-centered lament that acknowledges we are lost without Him. Biblical mourning begins here, with a humble acknowledgment of our need for a Saviour.

The Old Testament provides a rich backdrop for understanding this Beatitude. David, in Psalm 51, exemplifies mourning that leads to repentance. After his sin with Bathsheba and the death of their child, he does not hide or rationalize. He

mourns before God, confessing, "Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight" (Psalm 51:4). His mourning is not despair; it is honesty in the presence of God. It is the pathway to restoration. Similarly, Isaiah, upon seeing the glory of God in the temple, cries out, "Woe is me! For I am lost" (Isaiah 6:5). The prophet's grief over sin and unworthiness is immediate and raw, but God responds with cleansing and commissioning. Mourning, then, is not a sign of weakness, it is the mechanism by which God begins His work of redemption in our hearts.

Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount reframes mourning as a blessed state because it is the starting point of gospel change. The Greek word translated as 'mourn' carries the sense of deep lamentation, a genuine sorrow that penetrates the heart. It is not merely an emotional reaction to disappointment but an acknowledgment of brokenness before God. Mourning exposes our sin and, in exposing our sin, it creates the space for repentance. To mourn rightly is to recognize our spiritual poverty, our moral failings, and our inability to reconcile ourselves to God apart from Him. It is to cry out for mercy, acknowledging that the answer lies outside of ourselves in Jesus Christ.

This is a passage people commonly misunderstand. Some people assume Jesus is teaching that grief itself is inherently holy or that mourning is blessed regardless of where it comes from. Others think it refers only to mourning over loss or worldly suffering, divorcing it from sin and repentance. Still others conclude that Christians should always appear sorrowful or somber to be 'spiritual.' None of these views capture the heart of Jesus' teaching. Mourning is blessed not because of the mere experience of sadness but because it reflects a

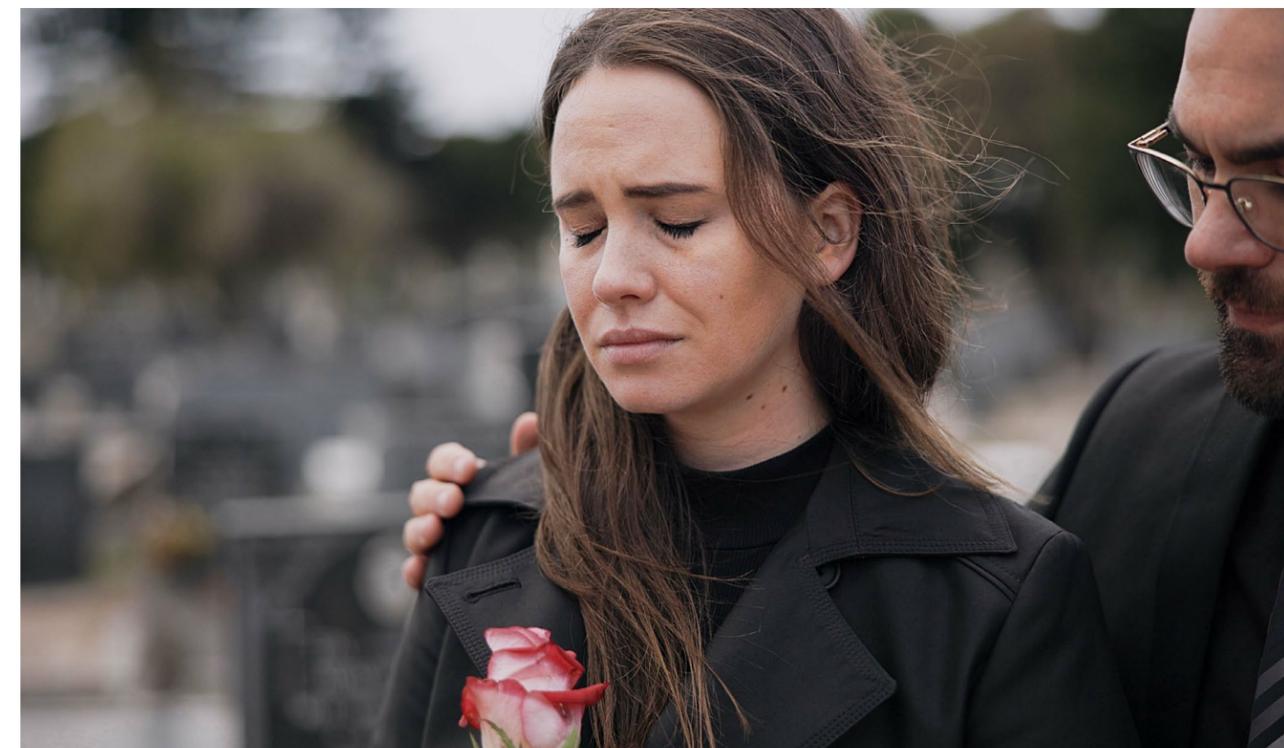
heart that recognizes its need for God and turns to Him in repentance.

Without that focus, grief can easily become self-pity, cynicism, or despair. These are things the Bible never commends. For example, a person might dwell on their mistakes or misfortunes, begin to see themselves as a perpetual victim, and think, *Nothing ever works out for me, and God doesn't care.* They may start to resent God or others, become bitter about circumstances, or feel permanently trapped in failure. Similarly, someone might mourn over suffering in the world without seeing God's redemption, leading to cynicism: "The world is hopeless; nothing will ever change." Left unchecked, grief can paralyze the heart and prevent genuine transformation. What Jesus means by mourning is different. He calls us to a mourning that acknowledges sin, brokenness, and our need, while simultaneously turning our gaze to God's mercy. Instead of self-absorption or despair, this grief moves us toward confession and repentance, trusting in God's restorative power. Mourning becomes the place where God's Spirit convicts, comforts, and redirects us toward life, rather than allowing us to spiral into bitterness or hopelessness.

This perspective reframes how we view sin and suffering. Mourning is not simply sorrow over circumstances, though that can be included; it is primarily sorrow over the distance between God's holiness and our rebellion. Romans 3:23 reminds us that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." When we take this truth to heart, mourning becomes the natural response. The grief that comes from recognizing our sin is a gift; it humbles us, it focuses us, it propels us toward repentance. Mourning is the door through which the gospel enters our hearts. It reminds us that we cannot save ourselves and that only Christ's perfect life, sacrificial death, and resurrection can restore us.

The New Testament continually emphasizes that God's comfort follows genuine mourning. Paul speaks of godly sorrow in 2 Corinthians 7, noting that it brings repentance, which leads to salvation and leaves no regret, while worldly sorrow leads only to death. Mourning, then, is both the acknowledgement of sin and the beginning of movement toward life. Jesus promises that those who mourn will be comforted, not with superficial relief, but with God's restorative presence. This comfort is first experienced in forgiveness through

Continued on next page



Continued from last page

Christ, a direct encounter with grace that relieves the weight of guilt and shame. When we mourn our sin, the Holy Spirit meets us, convicts us, guides us, and strengthens us to turn from our former ways.

There is also a relational aspect of repentance in Jesus' words. Mourning should never be a private, hidden sorrow that isolates us. It is the grief that draws us into God's presence and into the fellowship of His people. James encourages believers to confess sins to one another so that healing may occur (James 5:16). True mourning finds its full expression in community, where accountability, encouragement, and prayer help foster transformation. When we mourn before God and in the context of the body of Christ, repentance becomes a lived reality, not merely a theological concept.

Gospel mourning reshapes how we see the world. As our hearts grieve rightly, we become sensitive to the pain and injustice around us. We grieve not only personal sin but the sin of the world, the suffering of others, and the human brokenness manifested in our society. Romans 8 describes creation itself as groaning, longing for redemption. Believers, too, are invited into that groaning, not in despair but in hopeful anticipation of the kingdom. Mourning equips us to lament injustice, to intercede for the hurting, and to embody compassion in practical ways. It transforms self-seeking grief into God-centered action.

Jesus connects mourning with blessing because God is always at work in sorrow. Comfort is not a vague promise, or something delayed indefinitely; it is present and active. God's comfort begins in forgiveness, continues through the guidance and sustaining power of the Holy Spirit, and is manifested in the support of the church community. Ultimately, it culminates in Christ who enters fully into our grief. He is the Man of Sorrows acquainted with grief (Isaiah 53:3), who bore the weight of humanity's sin and suffering on the cross. Through His death and resurrection, He promises a day when all mourning will cease, when every tear will be wiped away, and when sorrow itself will be no more. This ultimate comfort is the hope that gives meaning and purpose to our present grief.

To allow ourselves to mourn rightly requires honesty and courage. It means naming sin, confessing it, and turning to God with a broken heart. It may involve lamenting circumstances or the brokenness of our world, but always with the understanding that our mourning is meant to draw us closer to our Redeemer. When we bring grief to God, we are invited into repentance, and repentance is the gateway to life and joy. Mourning prepares the heart for transformation, aligning us with God's purposes and orienting us toward His kingdom.

The gospel is central to this process. Mourning without hope is despair. The weight of sin can feel crushing until we give it over to Christ, who bore it once and for all. He invites us to come to Him, to confess, to receive forgiveness. In Him, mourning does not lead to shame but to liberation. As we grieve our sin and the world's brokenness, the Spirit leads us to repent and, in repentance, we encounter the fullness of God's comfort. The sorrow that opens the way to mercy, the grief that produces life, and the mourning that draws us into the embrace of a loving Saviour is the blessing Jesus promises.

Mourning is not an obstacle to blessing; it is a sign that God is at work. It directs our attention away from self-reliance and toward God's grace. It creates humility, sensitivity, and openness to His Word. Mourning changes the heart, aligns it with God's perspective, and leads to repentance that bears fruit. It is the first step in the journey from death to life, from bondage to freedom, and from brokenness to wholeness in Christ.

Church, Jesus invites us to embrace grief as a means of transformation. To mourn is to acknowledge our need, to turn from sin, and to lean fully on the comfort only Christ can provide. Mourning draws us into repentance and leads us into the arms of God—it is there we find forgiveness, restoration, and hope. In this way, even our deepest sorrow becomes a place of blessing, because it is the starting point for life and the joy of knowing Jesus Christ as our Saviour.



Pastor Randy is Lead Pastor at Mill Lake Church, where he and his wife, Allana, and their five children have served for the past 24 years. Randy enjoys movies, books, music, and hanging out with his family. You may also want to ask him about his interest in fountain pens.

MLC CELEBRATIONS IN MARCH



Congratulations to our long-time friend and MLC member, **Noreen Reimer**, in the fulfillment of a life-long dream to complete her degree. In February 2026, family and friends celebrated with Noreen as Prairie College presented her with **Matriarch of Biblical Scholars Honorary Degree** in giving honour to God and in recognition of her lifelong passion for bringing the Word of God to her family and community.

BIRTHDAYS

Hank Regehr	Mar 1
James Weststeijn	Mar 2
Kristen De Beer	Mar 3
Dave Peters	Mar 4
Lyndon Unger	Mar 9
James Griffiths	Mar 9
Helen Withers	Mar 9
Abbie Charlton	Mar 13
Jamie Cobb	Mar 13
Beth Laugesen	Mar 14
Zach Funk	Mar 14
Randy Lemke	Mar 15
Bennett Funk	Mar 15
Jacquie Blaschek	Mar 16
Tilly Tabak	Mar 18
Karen Laugesen	Mar 20
Miranda Moorhouse	Mar 25
Jayne Tobin	Mar 27
Don Murdoch	Mar 29
Nellie Romeyn	Mar 30
Tim Unger	Mar 31

ANNIVERSARIES

- Brody & Rebecca Fladmark - March 8
- Jim & Mariam Griffiths - March 16
- Bill & Helen Withers- March 24



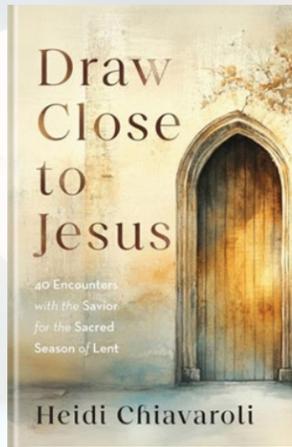
If you or someone you know is struggling with temporary food insecurity, check out the Gathering Markit

www.gatheringmarket.com

gathering
markit

FROM THE DESK OF DENISE RAMSAY

DRAW CLOSE TO JESUS
Heidi Chiavaroli



Get the book!



There's something comforting about sitting with a book in hand by my fireplace and watching the flames flicker and dance. I had a couple of books to choose from, but the one I gravitated to was a devotional designed for Lent. Award-winning author Heidi Chiavaroli, described as a hope-inspired storyteller, wrote *Draw Close to Jesus*. I recognized her name from a novel I read years ago, and the cover seemed inviting, so I sat and began immersing myself into what she describes as 'encountering Jesus through imaginative remembering.'

As I often do when looking into new non-fiction books, I opened to the middle and read. Yes, this seems strange, but if a book loses momentum in the middle, I may not want to continue. I was not disappointed!

The heading read: *Weeping in Ramah*, inspired by Matthew 2:13-18. My heart ached and my eyes pooled with tears as I read a tender story of a mother who had lost her child to Herod. I felt her sorrow and pain as she remembered her son killed in Bethlehem so many years before. As she met Jesus and called out to Adonai, the story captivated me, and this four-page devotion invoked a profound depth of emotion. I needed to take a moment before I could read the questions of reflection that followed.

Chiavaroli acknowledged that the story about the mother was not in the Bible, but the killing of the children in Bethlehem was. She gave some

suggested readings, and asked, "In what ways has God turned deep pain into an unexpected opportunity to show love or kindness to someone else?" and ended with a prayer for us to see the beauty of the world even in hard times. I did not move for some time; I simply sat in gratitude as I experienced Jesus through her story.

Each day I read, I found myself completely engaged with the fictional narratives based on scripture and historical research that gave a fresh perspective on familiar passages. These retellings drew me deeper into the Gospel stories, each feeling like a warm hug that confirmed the desirable invitation from Jesus, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

This unique devotional invites us to draw closer to Jesus. It was a gift I did not know I needed until I read it, but it's one I am grateful for. It challenged me to slow down and spend unhurried time with Jesus on His way to the cross, where He stepped in for my sin while offering forgiveness and rest for my weary soul.



Review by **Denise Ramsay**.
Denise is an avid reader with a busy family life. She serves on our MLC Women's Leadership Team and works as Book Manager at House of James.

FROM VICE TO VICTORY



By Kelly Heibert

My story is not one of quick fixes or shallow answers.

Growing up in an exceedingly non-Christian home, I fled my home in my teenage years and quickly found myself lost. I chased after money. Dreams focused solely on myself. And I felt trapped. During this deep, dark low in my life, I was overcome by all manner of vice. At the absolute end of myself, Christ found me and transformed my life. It is truly a miracle that I am now a Christian, because I once harboured a deep resentment toward Christians, believing they thought they were better than me.

Drowning in sin, with all its lies and false promises, Christ found me. That moment of surrender transformed my life forever. The girl who once hated Christians suddenly became one, and there was no going back. The truth of myself and, more importantly, the truth of who Jesus was opened my eyes. I was changed forever.

Though suffering has been a frequent visitor in my life, I've learned that God was not absent, even when He felt quiet. Hardship, perseverance, and a growing confidence in God's faithfulness have shaped my journey of faith and recovery.

As someone who has been sober and clean from drugs and alcohol for over five years, I understand the profound journey of recovery. At Life Recovery, a Christ-centered recovery home, I have the privilege of working with women in their first 90 days of recovery from drugs and alcohol. It is a blessing to share the hope of Jesus every day and witness His transforming power.

Besides my work at Life Recovery, I have a private practice in Aldergrove as a family and community counsellor, supporting individuals and couples dealing with anxiety, depression, and marriage challenges. This role allows me to help others find

healing and wholeness. I am also a mother of three beautiful daughters and eagerly anticipate the arrival of my first grandchild, a boy, in March 2026. This new chapter brings immeasurable delight and excitement to my life.

I find great joy in my involvement at Mill Lake Church, where I sing on the worship team. From the moment I walked through the church doors, I felt at home, and that sense of belonging has been a tremendous blessing.

Additionally, I am a lead singer in the West Coast Harmony Chorus, a championship chorus that ranks sixth in the world. Singing with this chorus brings me immense enjoyment and allows me to share my passion for music and community.

Above all, my faith is centered on the future hope we have in Christ. I look forward to Jesus' return, the promise of the new heaven and new earth, and the resurrection. This hope grounds my faith and brings meaning to every season of life.

I am deeply grateful for this journey and excited for all that lies ahead. I also have a heartfelt desire to reach out to those in our own church community who are struggling with addiction in any form, offering them hope and support.



Kelly Heibert, RTC, MCT, CACII, is an Addictions Counsellor and Family and Community Counsellor with a private practice in Aldergrove, BC. She also works at Life Recovery, a Christ-centered residential recovery program for women. Kelly is a mother of three daughters and a proud grandmother.

Life in God's Family

Part 3 of a 3-Part Series: *Tithing*



By Lyndon Unger

Editor's Note: *When we come to faith in Christ, we are welcomed into God's family. In this series, Lyndon explores three practices that help shape and express that belonging. Together, these practices point us toward a life of faith, obedience, and shared identity in Christ.*

In the previous two articles, we discussed two activities in which Christians engage as part of God's family—baptism and its significance as a public declaration of association with God's family and communion and how Christ changed the Passover meal forever, from a remembrance of Israel's redemption from slavery in Egypt to a remembrance of Christian's redemption from slavery to sin. Now we're going to talk about the subject about which there is the most confusion: tithing.

The Hebrew terms translated as "tithe" or "tithing" essentially mean "a tenth." Genesis 14:20 records the first tithe/tenth (definitely not the last), when Abram gave Melchizedek a tithe/tenth of everything he gained from his victory against four kings in the Valley of Siddim (Gen. 14:1-16).

In Exodus, God instructs Israel to set apart the firstborn of all their animals and sons unto the Lord to redeem them (Ex. 13:11-13). Deuteronomy 14:23 places this offering as a part of the greater yearly tithe of the harvest. The animal offerings had to happen on the eighth day after the animal was born (Ex. 22:29-30), with no exceptions (Ex. 34:19). To buy back or redeem the animal, one needed to pay a 20% markup over market value (Lev. 27:26-27).

In Leviticus, we see one rule that wasn't called a tithe, but carried financial consequences. It was called the rule of gleaning. No Israelite was to harvest the edges of their fields, strip their grape vines bare, or pick up any grapes that fell upon the ground; these were all left for the poor and foreigner (Lev. 19:10, 23:22).

Then, in Leviticus 27:30-33, we see the yearly tithe of the harvest. This tithe commands Israel to give a tenth of all their produce, whether from the vine

or the field. They could purchase back/redeem this tenth as well, but again at a 20% markup over market value. With animals, if the tithe included any they didn't want to offer, they could substitute another animal, but they would lose both animals with neither being redeemed.

In Deuteronomy 14:22-27, we see that the yearly tithe of the harvest did not serve as an offering that was burned. Rather, they prepared it, in part, as a feast in a specific place chosen by God. This feast marked a point of rejoicing and celebration, used to feed the Levites who did not have to participate in this tithe outside of enjoying the feast.

In Deuteronomy 14:28-29, we see another explicit tithe: the tithe for the poor, which happened every 3 years. The Israelites divided a tenth of the produce and animals among the foreigner, the orphan, the widow, and the Levites.

In Numbers 18:21-32, we see the Levites received every tithe that was presented to the Lord as a contribution to the Lord, in place of their having no inheritance of land. From the tithe to the Levites, Aaron received a tenth.

Outside of these tithes, which total a minimum of 13% of people's yearly income, there were all the required sin offerings and sacrifices (i.e. Lev. 1-7), as well as non-required free-will offerings (i.e. Lev. 22:18-23).

Christians have often read all these Old Testament regulations about the tenth/tithe and assumed they applied to them. However, the regulations about tithing were given to the nation of Israel, not the church. In fact, the terms related to tithing don't appear in the New Testament in any form of command to Christians whatsoever. The only mention of tithing is in reference to people under

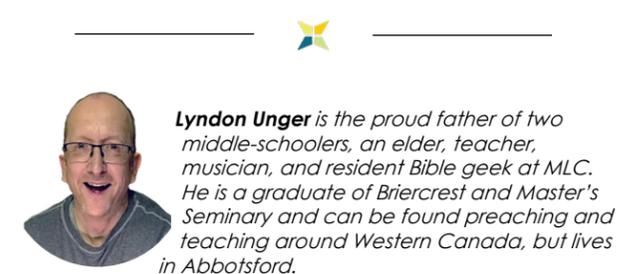
the Old Covenant (see Matt. 23:23; Lk. 11:42, 18:12; Heb. 7:5-6, 7:8-9).

In the New Covenant, there is no prescribed percentage of what Christians need to give to God. In fact, "tithing" as a concept doesn't come forward into the New Covenant at all. Instead of tithing, the Bible instructs Christians to give generously (2 Cor. 8:1-3; 1 Tim. 6:17-18), and actively pursue opportunities to provide financial relief for fellow believers who are in financial need (2 Cor. 8:4). Christians give out of love for one another (2 Cor. 8:8; 1 Jn. 3:16-18) and in following Christ's example (2 Cor. 8:9). When fellow Christians need help, other Christians with abundant financial provision are encouraged to give from their excess (2 Cor. 8:13-15). Generosity must also not be performative, but done secretly and humbly, which the Lord will see and reward (Matt. 6:1-4). The idea of "storing up treasures in heaven" is foundationally about the Lord rewarding the generosity of Christians in the future and also as an expression of devotion to the Lord (Matt. 6:19-21, 24; 1 Tim. 6:19).

The Old Testament principle that comes forward into the New Covenant is the principle of sowing and reaping (2 Cor. 9:6). Those who give must give cheerfully, from the heart and not out of reluctance or guilt (2 Cor. 9:7), remembering that the Lord is the one from whom all our provisions come in the first place (2 Cor. 9:8-9; Phil. 4:19). Contrary to many popular preachers and pastors who peddle the prosperity gospel, the harvest reaped from giving is not financial prosperity, but righteousness (2 Cor. 9:10-11), spiritual fruit (Phil. 4:16-17), and a heart of thanksgiving, both in those who give and those who

receive (2 Cor. 9:12-15). When we give to the Lord, we don't get money back in this life. In this life, we get character, virtue, and spiritual growth, which leads to financial prosperity. However, we don't receive financial prosperity in this life; it's received in the kingdom (Lk. 19:11-27).

We must wisely use our money for God's purposes, knowing He will indeed reward faithful stewardship (Lk. 16:1-13).



Lyndon Unger is the proud father of two middle-schoolers, an elder, teacher, musician, and resident Bible geek at MLC. He is a graduate of Briercrest and Master's Seminary and can be found preaching and teaching around Western Canada, but lives in Abbotsford.





The Old Blue Bus:

A True Story of Faith in Action

By Jim Griffiths

"How soon we gettin' there, man? I need a smoke."

Ben was part of a group that comprised a co-leader, myself, and six teenage boys who constantly got into scrapes at home, school, and with the police. The boys prided themselves on being expert car thieves, break-and-enter artists, and bullies at school, which is why the court put them into a six-month wilderness skills and work program I headed up. Only a week before, I had introduced my six bravado charges to our program and each other. After a few days of work-related instruction and experience, we set out on our first wilderness outing.

The old blue bus barked its deep voice along the seventy-mile desolate mountain road from Quesnel towards Wells in northern BC. From Wells, we'd drive another 25 miles to our destination—the famous Bowron Lakes Park.

The early morning sun blinded me as I drove past the halfway mark of the winding, hilly, narrow road known as Highway 26. The 12-passenger, stubby bus smelled of gasoline and oil. Behind it, we pulled a trailer with four canoes and all the food and equipment we needed for a ten-day, 75-mile canoe trip around a circuit of lakes and portages.

My job was to help the boys understand that the world was not all about them and their own desires; that there were broader things at play; that other people's needs and rights, society's rules, and nature's laws meant something. And, if possible, let them know about a God who loved and cared for them.

"It won't be too long now, Ben," I said, glancing at the gas gauge. *Good, still full since we filled up, I thought. How many miles ago was that, anyway? This old bus sure gets great mileage. Still, it seems like a long time since we got gas. Oh well. Only about 35 miles to Wells. We should be okay.*

As the boys continued their chatter behind me, I thought about the time we spent together around a campfire the night before, practicing for this trip at our base camp in the Okanagan. Mike, one boy, had asked, "So, what's all this about a creator I heard someone mention?"

I had explained that everything in the universe, and even our world, is way too orderly to have just happened by itself. Someone had to have made it. The main thing to know is that there is a Creator—a Maker, if you like. And we can know that Someone personally, if we want.

"You gotta be kiddin' me," Mike said, swearing. "Where'd you get an idea like that? My science teacher said we all came from 'meebas' and monkeys and stuff like that. He didn't tell me nothin' about some dumb creator. Right, guys?"

"Yeah, that's right," said Mark. "Anyone who believes that stuff is a goof."

"That's for sure. If there was a...what'd you call it? —a creator; how come He let all this bad stuff happen?" asked Pete.

That conversation went in circles and ended with me giving a few examples. But they weren't buying it. *No worries, I thought. Something will present itself.*

The bus coughed and sputtered as it climbed a hill, and roared back to life on the downslope.

"Hey, what's wrong with this pile of crap?" Ben asked. "It's gonna die."

"Yeah, man, it sounds sick. Is it gonna get us there?" Ken asked.

I sure hope so, I thought. We're a long way from a service station.

We'd passed no signs of civilization since leaving Quesnel about 40 miles back—just mountains, forests, rivers, and sky. And we'd only passed one oncoming car that whole way. Climbing the next hill, the bus coughed more and barely made it over the crest to cruise down the other side.

"I told ya somethin's wrong with this heap," Ben said. "We're gonna be stuck out here when this thing packs it in."

Everyone else began complaining, swearing, and crowding around me to look out the front window as we sped up for the next hill.

The gas gauge still read full. I tapped on it. Nothing. When I banged on it with the side of my fist, the needle dropped from full to empty.

All the boys yelled, "We're out a gas!"

There was a chorus of more colourful language, frantic yelling, and pointing at the gauge as we barely made it over the hilltop before the engine sputtered and quit. I pressed on the clutch, coasted down a winding hill until we completely lost speed on a long flat stretch of road, and pulled onto the gravel shoulder at the edge of a deep ravine.

We all clambered out of the bus into a biting wind that smelled like pine. Birds chirped, and the sun glistened on the stream at the bottom of the ravine. We stood at the front of the bus while the guys lit up their cigarettes and glared at me.

"So, now what, big leader?" Mark chided.

I looked to my right, toward the direction we were supposed to travel, but the road disappeared over a hill about a mile away. No car. I stepped out onto the road and looked past the bus in the direction we'd just come. The road ribboned its way over the hilltops and into the distance. Nothing there either.

Ben cursed, saying the situation was hopeless. "We're stuck out here with no gas, no phone, and no car in sight. What're we gonna do, man?"

"Well," I said with a confident smile, "remember our talk last night about a creator?"

Ben slammed his fist on the side of the bus and swore. "Man, you gotta do somethin'!"

"Okay. Let's do something right now. If there is a Creator, and He listens to us, let's ask Him to help us. What do we have to lose?"

"What d'ya mean, ask Him?" asked John, the smallest kid of the bunch.

"We'll do it now. Bow your heads if you want to get out of here, and I'll ask Him." They all bowed their heads, darting their eyes at each other.

"Heavenly Father, you know our situation. We ask that You hear us. We need Your help. Now we'll wait for Your answer. Thank you. Amen."

One or two of the boys also added, "Amen."

"That's it? So now what?" Ben asked with a quizzical look on his face.

"Let's just give it about 10 minutes and see what happens. You guys go and chill out, but let's all think about what God's going to do for us.

"You mean, just wait here like dummies?"

"Yeah," I said with conviction in my voice. "We just wait here like dummies who expect an answer, okay?"

"Oh, okay, then. You don't have to get mad." "But how do you know He'll answer?" Ben added.

"That's a good question. The answer is because He's answered me in difficult times before."

Continued on next page

Continued from last page

"Oh, I see," he said, nodding slowly before he turned to talk quietly with the other boys.

Someone picked up a rock from the shoulder of the road, threw it into space, and watched it descend until it eventually hit the stream at the bottom of the ravine. Soon they were all throwing rocks to see who could make the biggest splash.

After about 30 minutes, Mark pointed in the direction from where we'd come and yelled, "Hey, look, there's something coming way over there."

Barely visible and driving toward us over the furthest ribbon of road, we saw a vehicle before it drove down out of sight.

"There it is again on a closer hill," Ken said with excitement.

It reappeared about five times, each time getting closer and larger. We could hear its engine getting louder and breaking the silence of the wilderness. Finally, it appeared on the long, flat section of highway where we waited.

"Everyone stand back and see what he does," I directed. They all stood off the pavement, along the gravel portion, in front of our bus.

The engine got louder as a beat-up, 4x4 Toyota Land Cruiser came closer.

"Hey, he isn't slowing down," Mark shouted.

"Don't worry," I said.

The vehicle roared past us with a gust of air, and the guys all moaned, "Oh no."

At that moment, the vehicle slammed on its brakes, slowed down, and pulled over to the shoulder about 150 yards away from us. It then rushed back toward us and skidded to a stop. The driver jumped out, hurried around to the passenger side, where he unfastened something red, and carried it in one hand while he held his free arm straight out from his side.

About 20 paces away, the burly man with a beard, a red and black Mac-jacket, and suspenders called out, "You guys need some gas?"

I replied, "That'd be great. How'd you know?"

"Oh, just a sudden hunch is all."

The guys all followed him and watched as he poured his five gallons of gas into our bus and screwed the lid back on his red jerry can.

"How much do we owe you?" I asked, reaching for my wallet.

"It's on the house; just help the next guy who needs help, okay?"

"Okay," I said with a smile and a handshake. "Thanks."

"I'm off then. See you boys later," he said as he trotted back to his 4x4 and sped off.

My guys stood there with their mouths wide open and watched the 4x4 shrink into the distance.

After we clambered aboard our blue bus and resumed our journey, I said, "Well, fellas, that was our answer. What did you think?"

"Wow, far out. That was unreal."

"Yes, it was far out," I said. "And it definitely was real." Smiling to myself, I thanked God and thought about the talks we'd have around the campfire during the nights of our canoe trip around the lakes.

Author's Note: *One of the boys in this story came to know the Lord and went on to be a pastor.*



Jim Griffiths earned his degree in Psychology and spent decades serving with missions reaching underprivileged youth and those in trouble with the law. There, he used his counselling, mountaineering, and outdoor skills. He also taught wilderness survival to airline pilots. Jim enjoys sailing, reading, and writing poetry. He and his wife, Ann, have been active members at MLC for 22 years.



KIDS

Kids (Kindergarten through grade 5) are invited downstairs during our worship service time to have their own special Bible lesson! We are always learning. Here's what we're up to for the month of March:

MARCH 1
FAMILY SUNDAY
Worship with our church family
(student activity packs available at Connect).

MARCH 8
JESUS TAUGHT TO LOVE GOD + OTHERS
(Matthew 5:1-2, 42-48; Mark 12:28-34)
Jesus taught that believers should forgive others as God forgives them.

MARCH 15
JESUS TAUGHT NOT TO WORRY
(Matthew 6:25-34)
Jesus taught about faith, trust, and obedience to God.

MARCH 22
JESUS TAUGHT ABOUT GIVING
(Mark 12:41-44)
Jesus taught that worship is focused on God.

MARCH 29
THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY
(Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-38)
Jesus is the Messiah.

MEMORY VERSE

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Matthew 6:33 ESV

TOTS

God has blessed our Mill Lake Church family with sweet little ones to care for while their parents worship together in the service. It's a joy to serve His littlest ones each week!

YOUTH

Come on out to Youth Night every Monday @ 7 p.m., in the gym.

Bring your Bibles and a great attitude, ready to learn and have fun together!

@mlcyouth



DIVISIVENESS VS DIVERSITY

By Deb Fehr

When asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus did not point to winning arguments, defending positions, or proving others wrong. He was unmistakably clear about what mattered most. He spoke of love...love for God with our whole being, and love for our neighbour as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-40). Not only do these two commands guide our faith, but they also guide how we navigate differences, acting as a filter for all our words, actions, and convictions.

Diversity itself is not the problem. A variety of people, experiences, perspectives, and callings mark God's creation. The body of Christ comprises many parts, each necessary and uniquely gifted. Diversity can strengthen us when held with humility and grace. Divisiveness, however, is something else entirely. It quietly shifts our focus from love to opposition, from relationship to rivalry. It turns differences into battle lines and invites us to see one another as threats rather than fellow image-bearers. Bottom line? It directly contradicts the heart of Christ.

Scripture reminds us that the enemy seeks to divide, disrupt, and destroy. And division has always been one of his most effective weapons.

Many of us have seen the damage firsthand. Families fractured over political views. Friendships lost because of denominational distinctions or worship music differences. Long-standing relationships reduced to silence, not because of cruelty or abuse, but because of disagreement. Conversations meant to persuade quickly become contests to win. When that happens, relationships fracture.

Strife takes root when people label someone a "hater" solely for holding a different view. Hearts harden and division replaces dialogue. It's worth asking: Does this reflect the heart of Christ?

Jesus never demanded uniformity. He consistently called people to love. He did not force belief or argue people into transformation; He trusted the Holy Spirit to do the deeper work of conviction and change.

This doesn't mean abandoning convictions or avoiding hard conversations. It means holding our beliefs without letting them harden our hearts. It means choosing a relationship over the need to convince. It means recognizing when division is being stirred and refusing to take part. A hurting world is watching. Not to see whose argument is strongest, but to see whether love still leads us.

We are not called to be right fighters. We're called to be Christ followers. Jesus prayed for unity among His followers, knowing that love would be our witness to the world. That means resisting the urge to convince, correct, or conquer one another. Truth does not require hostility to stand firm. The Holy Spirit alone convicts hearts, opens eyes, and brings about transformation. When we take that role upon ourselves, we often do more harm than good.

Loving God with all our heart means trusting Him enough to release control. Loving our neighbour means valuing relationships over being right.

Christlike discernment allows us to hold convictions without hardening our hearts. To honour diversity

without slipping into division. To remember that love, not argument, is the greatest commandment lived out.

Scripture plainly states that God is not honoured when discord is sown among His people (Proverbs 6:16-19). Broken fellowship grieves the heart of God. If our words lead to alienation rather than reconciliation, we must pause and examine not just what we are saying, but how and why we are saying it.

Jesus never taught us to sever relationships in order to defend beliefs. He taught us to love—especially when it is difficult. A hurting world is not watching to see who wins arguments; it is watching to see whether Christ's followers look any different from everyone else.

This requires honest self-reflection. Are we showing Christ's love when we dismiss, block, shame, or silence one another? Do we feel compelled to push our political opinions or religious convictions onto everyone who crosses our path? Or do we trust Jesus enough to let Him do the work of conviction, transformation, and truth-revealing through the Holy Spirit?

Jesus did not chase people down with forceful persuasion. He invited. He listened. He spoke the truth when necessary—but always in love. And then He entrusted hearts to the Father.

We must learn to do the same.

Loving God with all our heart means surrendering our need to control outcomes. Loving our neighbour means choosing relationship over rhetoric. Division carried out in His name does not honour Christ. His people honour Him when they walk in humility, patience, and grace.

In an already fractured world, let people know us for our faithfulness, not for being right. Not for winning debates, but for reflecting Christ.



Deb Fehr is a wife, mom, and community encourager who is a woman learning to find grace in every season. While she suffers from Ankylosing Spondylitis, she loves sharing hope with others. Deb and Richard have attended MLC for the past five years.

Save the Date

April 24, 2026
7:00 p.m.

All women welcome.
Bring your friends.

MILL LAKE
Women

MILL LAKE
COMMUNITY CUPBOARD

TAKE WHAT YOU NEED

LEAVE WHAT YOU CAN

Oh Wow!
Instant Noodles

Help fill the
COMMUNITY CUPBOARD

BRING DONATIONS TO BOX IN LOBBY



IS GAMBLING A SIN?

Source: www.gotquestions.org.

The Bible does not specifically condemn games of chance, gambling, betting, or the lottery. The Bible does warn us, however, against the love of money (1 Timothy 6:10; Hebrews 13:5). Wisdom avoids short cuts to prosperity: "Wealth from get-rich-quick schemes quickly disappears; wealth from hard work grows over time" (Proverbs 13:11, NLT). We are to work hard and earn a living (2 Thessalonians 3:10; Proverbs 14:23). Most gambling is motivated by a love of money. People place bets with the hope of quick and easy riches. Materialism is at the root of gambling.

The Bible mentions events of "luck" or "chance" in contexts other than gambling or betting. For

example, casting lots was God's prescribed method of choosing between the sacrificial goat and the scapegoat (Leviticus 16:8). Joshua cast lots to determine the allotment of land to the various tribes, and the results were accepted as God's will (Joshua 18:10). Nehemiah cast lots to determine who would live inside the walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 11:1). The apostles cast lots to determine the replacement for Judas (Acts 1:26). Each of these occasions proved the truth of Proverbs 16:33, which says, "The lot is cast in the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD." None of these instances of casting lots has to do with betting or the transfer of goods. The apostles' casting lots in Acts 1 is no justification for playing craps in Vegas.

One infamous scene of gambling occurred at the foot of Jesus' cross. Scripture makes note of the Roman soldiers' callous game of chance: "After they had nailed him to the cross, the soldiers gambled for his clothes by throwing dice" (Matthew 27:35, NLT). This was materialism at its most brazen—they occupied themselves with a little piece of this world as they turned their backs on the one who offered them heaven.

Gambling, by nature, takes advantage of the misfortune of others. In order for one person to win, someone else—usually multiple others—must lose. For a Christian to risk money in the off chance that he will gain even more is foolish. But to actively seek financial benefit from someone else's loss is beyond foolish; it is unethical.

Casinos use all sorts of marketing schemes to entice gamblers to risk as much money as possible. They often offer inexpensive or even free alcohol, which encourages drunkenness—and a decreased ability to make good decisions. Everything in a casino is designed to appeal to materialistic desires. Even in those games that require a certain amount of skill and do not rely solely on luck, the gambler is seeking to benefit from the misfortune of others and playing into a rigged system. The aim of a casino is to take money in large sums and give little in return.

Sports betting is becoming more popular—and more accessible—by the day. Some argue in its defense, saying that sports betting is harmless entertainment. Some say that betting on a team, especially if it's a fantasy team, requires some research and skill to be successful. Critics point out that gambling of any kind can lead to addiction. According to the National Council on Problem Gambling, about 5 million Americans can be classified as compulsive gamblers (www.addictionhelp.com/gambling/statistics, accessed 5/20/25). And critics point out that sports betting can easily harm the integrity of the sport in question when players are bribed to shave points or throw a game. So, there are several ethical and moral concerns with sports betting.

State and national lotteries are another form of gambling. Lotteries tempt people with the possibility of quick riches and are marketed as a way to fund education and/or social programs. However, it seems that those the lottery is supposed to help are actually being hurt. A recent study showed that U.S.

households in the lowest income bracket spend 13 percent of their annual household income on lottery tickets; in contrast, the highest earners spend just one percent of their income on the lottery (Bankrate survey, October 2019). So, those who can least afford to spend money on lottery tickets are often the ones buying them. With the chances of winning the lottery being infinitesimal, the whole system preys upon the poor.

First Timothy 6:10 provides wisdom that directly relates to gambling: "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." Greed is equated with idolatry in Colossians 3:5. Those who gamble cannot follow the admonition of Hebrews 13:5: "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have." Serving God and serving money are incompatible (Matthew 6:24).

Does the Bible forbid a friendly wager between two players going head-to-head on a tennis court? What about paying a dime into the kitty for a bingo card? Entering a raffle? Filling out a March Madness bracket in the office pool? The answer is no, the Bible does not explicitly forbid these things. When it comes to betting of any kind, followers of Jesus should use discernment in examining their motives, their testimony, and their responsibility to steward their resources wisely. ✨

Got questions?
Each month, we'll answer some tricky ones you may be wrestling with. Find more in the upcoming issues of *Branches!*



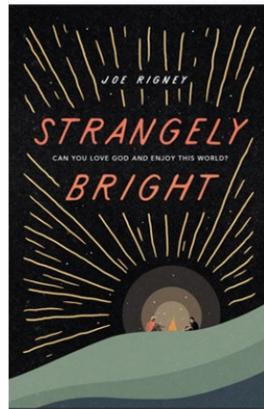
Here's your opportunity to read through the Bible in 2026. This M'Cheyne Bible Reading Plan will enable you to read through the OT once and NT twice in the year.

1. Ex 12:22-51; Lk 15; Job 30; 1 Cor 16
2. Ex 13; Lk 16; Job 31; 2 Cor 1
3. Ex 14; Lk 17; Job 32; 2 Cor 2
4. Ex 15; Lk 18; Job 33; 2 Cor 3
5. Ex 16; Lk 19; Job 34; 2 Cor 4
6. Ex 17; Lk 20; Job 35; 2 Cor 5
7. Ex 18; Lk 21; Job 36; 2 Cor 6
8. Ex 19; Lk 22; Job 37; 2 Cor 7
9. Ex 20; Lk 23; Job 38; 2 Cor 8
10. Ex 21; Lk 24; Job 39; 2 Cor 9
11. Ex 22; Jn 1; Job 40; 2 Cor 10
12. Ex 23; Jn 2; Job 41; 2 Cor 11
13. Ex 24; Jn 3; Job 42; 2 Cor 12
14. Ex 25; Jn 4; Prv 1; 2 Cor 13
15. Ex 26; Jn 5; Prv 2; Gal 1
16. Ex 27; Jn 6; Prv 3; Gal 2
17. Ex 28; Jn 7; Prv 4; Gal 3
18. Ex 29; Jn 8; Prv 5; Gal 4
19. Ex 30; Jn 9; Prv 6; Gal 5
20. Ex 31; Jn 10; Prv 7; Gal 6
21. Ex 32; Jn 11; Prv 8; Eph 1
22. Ex 33; Jn 12; Prv 9; Eph 2
23. Ex 34; Jn 13; Prov 10; Eph 3
24. Ex 35; Jn 14; Prv 11; Eph 4
25. Ex 36; Jn 15; Prv 12; Eph 5
26. Ex 37; Jn 16; Prv 13; Eph 6
27. Ex 38; Jn 17; Prv 14; Phil 1
28. Ex 39; Jn 18; Prv 15; Phil 2
29. Ex 40; Jn 19; Prv 16; Phil 3
30. Lev 1; Jn 20; Prv 17; Phil 4
31. Lev 2-3; Jn 21; Prv 18; Col 1

PASTOR RANDY'S RECOMMENDED READING

STRANGELY BRIGHT: CAN YOU LOVE GOD AND ENJOY THIS WORLD?

By Joe Rigney



In *Strangely Bright*, Joe Rigney helps us navigate a tension many Christians feel but struggle to articulate: How do we love God supremely without shrinking from the good gifts He places in our lives? Too often, we swing to extremes—either fearing enjoyment as a threat to holiness or indulging God's gifts without reference to the Giver. Rigney charts a better, deeply biblical path.

With clarity and warmth, this short book reminds us that creation's joys—shared meals, music, laughter, beauty—are not rivals to worship but invitations to it. When received with gratitude and rightly ordered love, they lead our hearts back to God rather than away from Him. Rigney writes as a pastor-theologian who understands real life and anchors every insight in Scripture.

I warmly commend this book to you. It will help you enjoy God more fully, enjoy His gifts more faithfully, and live with a joyful seriousness that magnifies Christ in everyday life.

MUSIC Moment

HEARTBROKEN HALLELUJAH

By MercyMe

Scan the QR code with your phone camera and savour some time with God through music. Alternatively, you can find this song by searching on youtube.com.

LISTEN HERE

