

Put On Your Armour

"Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in Him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

John 15:4-5



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JANUARY BIRTHDAYS

Travis Kragh - Jan 2
Jonah Rusu - Jan 5
Philip Lowes - Jan 6
Tracy Tobin - Jan 17
John Tobin - Jan 20
Dynasty Mitchell - Jan 22
Dave Twiest - Jan 26
Richard Sarrazin - Jan 30

JANUARY ANNIVERSARIES

Annette & Daryle Brandt - Jan 9

FEBRUARY BIRTHDAYS

Bernice Neufeld - Feb 5
Carolyn Twiest - Feb 5
Samuel Willisicroft - Feb 7
Anne Dueck - Feb 12
Sarah Far - Feb 14
Noah Willisicroft - Feb 20
Wade Hammond - Feb 22

February 2026 | Issue 53

BRANCHES

A Mill Lake Church magazine

Blessed are the

Poor in Spirit

pg 9

A Prayer for Valentine's Day

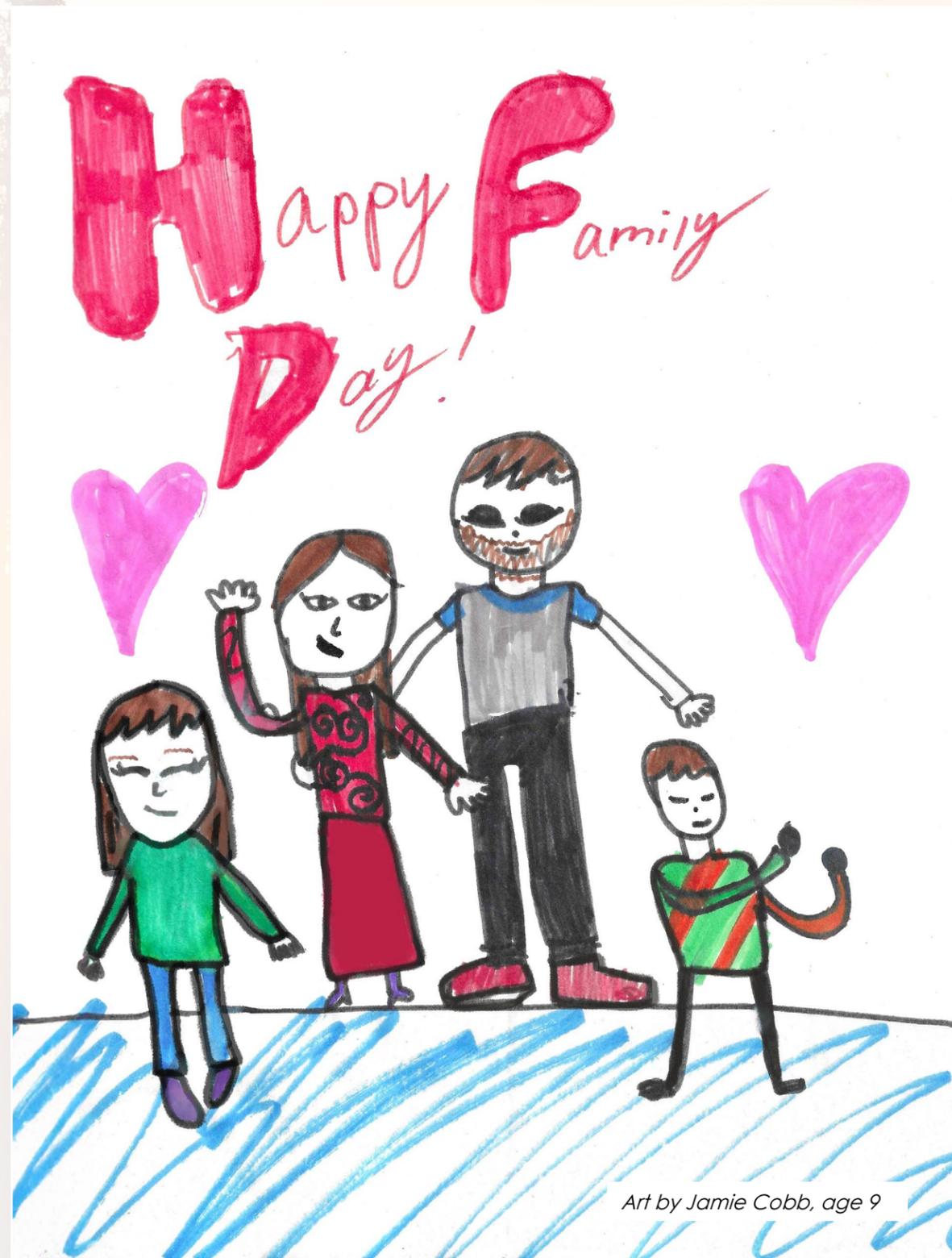
pg 12

My International Faith Journey

pg 16

Single, But Not Lonely





Art by Jamie Cobb, age 9

Dear Friends –

Some people like to choose a word for the year—or a Bible verse to carry with them through the months ahead. Others don't. There's no right or wrong. But for those willing to pause and listen, it can be a meaningful way to notice how God may want to shape the year to come.

It's a practice I've followed for more than twenty years and, over time, I've seen how God uses it to gently form and guide me. Sometimes I question the word or verse He draws my attention to. But through prayer and reflection, I've come to release my own preferences and lean into what He's gently placing on my heart.

While I wasn't afraid of what my word for 2026 suggested, I'll admit it didn't particularly excite me. The accompanying verse also didn't initially resonate with me. Still, experience has reminded me that even when I don't fully understand, God remains faithful—and there's a lot to be thankful for—even in the hard things.

As you look toward the year before you, you may wonder what God has in store. But no matter what comes, this truth remains: God walks with you—always. And that promise is for all of us.

In this issue of *Branches*, you'll find articles and reflections meant to encourage you and invite you to consider how God might be calling you to grow as a follower of Jesus in the year ahead.

By the way, if you'd like to know my word and verse for 2026, I hope you'll ask me. I'd also love to hear yours. It's a meaningful way for us to learn from and encourage one another.

Know you are loved,



Ann Griffiths

Editor



BRANCHES

Issue 53

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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

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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

WHAT'S INSIDE

- 6 Blessed Are The Poor in Spirit
- 8 Book Review: *A Song in the Dark*
- 9 A Prayer for Valentine's Day
- 10 Life in God's Family - Part 2 of a 3-Part Series: Communion
- 12 Inspiring Connections: My International Faith Journey
- 14 Showing Love

- 16 Single, But Not Lonely
- 19 God's Preferential Option for the Poor in Spirit
- 21 Family Discipleship
- 22 2026 Bible Reading Plan Month 2
- 22 Pastor Randy's Recommended Reading
- 23 Music Moment: *Blessed*
- 24 Put On Your Armour

● Regular Features
● Special Features

LET'S CONNECT!

ADULTS TOGETHER

Bible Study: Every Sunday, 9-9:45 a.m. at the church
Gospel Clarity Study: Tuesdays, 7-9 p.m. in the church lower auditorium.
This month: February 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.
This month: February 2, 9, 16, & 23.

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: February 3, 10, 17, & 25. Come for coffee and prayer
Breakfast Break: Every 2nd Tuesday of the month at JoJo's, 10 a.m. This month: February 10.
Bible Study: The 2nd & 4th Saturday, 9-10:30 a.m. at the church. This month: February 14 & 28.
Ascent Discipleship: Meets monthly, 8-11 a.m. at the church in Room 102. This month: February 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: February 4, 11, 18, & 25.
Evening Bible Study: Mondays, 6:30-8:30 p.m. in the church lower auditorium.
This month: February 2, 9, & 23.

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: February 18.

The Blessed Life

Blessed Are The Poor in Spirit

Matthew 5:3

By Randy Lemke

Jesus opens the Beatitudes with a statement that immediately unsettles us: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." If we're honest, this isn't the blessing we would have chosen. We don't aspire to poverty of any kind. We admire strength, confidence, and self-sufficiency. Yet Jesus begins here, because this is where life with God always begins—not with fullness, but with need.

To be poor in spirit is not about material poverty, personality type, or low self-esteem. Jesus is not praising weakness for its own sake, nor is He calling us to think less of ourselves. He is speaking about spiritual posture. To be poor in spirit is to recognize that before God, we have nothing to offer and nothing to prove. It is the honest awareness that we are spiritually bankrupt apart from His grace.

This is deeply countercultural. We live in a world that tells us to be self-made, self-confident, and self-reliant. Even in the church, we can subtly absorb the idea that maturity means having it together. We learn how to speak the right language, manage our image, and hide our doubts. But Jesus looks past appearances and blesses those who stop pretending.

Spiritual poverty begins with gaining clarity. It is seeing ourselves as we truly are before a holy God—not comparing ourselves to others but standing honestly in the shadow of His holiness. The poor in spirit will know they are not sufficient and will come with empty hands. Remarkably, Jesus says these are the ones who are blessed.

Why? Because poverty of spirit creates space for God. When we finally admit that we are not enough, we stop resisting grace. We stop negotiating with

God. We stop trying to earn something that we can only receive. The poor in spirit are not those who feel miserable about themselves, but those who have stopped trusting in themselves altogether.

This is where the gospel begins. Before there is forgiveness, there is confession. Before there is healing, there is honesty. Before there is resurrection life, there is death to self-reliance. Jesus starts the Beatitudes here because every other blessing flows out of this one. Until we see our need, we will never truly come to Christ.

The promise attached to this beatitude is staggering: "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Not "will be," but "is." The kingdom belongs right now to those who know they need it. God does not give His kingdom to the important, or the powerful, or the spiritually proud. He gives it to the needy—to those who come knowing they have nothing before God.

This challenges how we approach Jesus. Do we come to Him as helpers or as beggars? Do we pray as if we are negotiating, or as if we are dependent? Do we approach Scripture looking for affirmation of our strength, or transformation of our hearts? Poverty of spirit reshapes the way we pray, the way we worship, and the way we repent.

Being poor in spirit is humility. It is teachable instead of defensive. It is true repentance of people who know they stand by grace alone.

This kind of poverty also affects how we relate to others. When we know we have received mercy we did not earn, we become slower to judge and quicker to forgive. We listen more. We boast less. We don't need to dominate conversations or prove

our point at all costs. We are free to serve because our worth is already secure.

Jesus' words invite us to examine ourselves carefully, to awaken us. Are we poor in spirit, or are we quietly confident in our own righteousness? Do we come to church with a desire for God? Do we depend on God daily in the good and the difficult?

Matthew 7:13-14 (ESV) invites us to "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." The doorway into the kingdom is too narrow to carry our pride through it. We need to leave our self-sufficiency behind. We enter the kingdom in a posture of humility. When we stop trying to be enough, we finally find rest.

Living as the poor in spirit means continually coming back to this posture as a daily rhythm. We begin each day by remembering that every breath is a gift. We come to God again and again, not because we are worthy, but because He is gracious.

As a church, this beatitude calls us to cultivate a culture of grace. A place where honesty is safe. Where repentance is normal. Where no one needs to pretend they have it all together. A community where we remind one another that we stand on level ground at the foot of the cross.

Jesus begins the blessed life here for a reason. The poor in spirit are not the weak ones in the kingdom; they are the heirs. They receive what no amount of effort could earn. They inherit a kingdom built not on human strength and ability but on divine mercy.

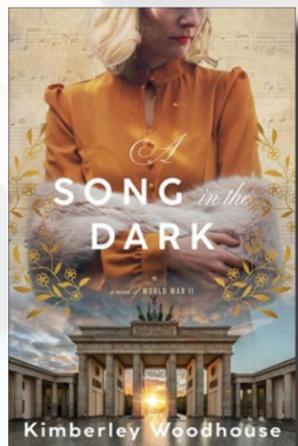
And so, the invitation is given to us, Mill Lake... come to Jesus, empty and be filled. Come aware of your need and receive His riches. Come poor in spirit—and discover that the kingdom of heaven is yours.



Pastor Randy is Lead Pastor at Mill Lake Church, where he and his wife, Allana, and their five children have served for the past 23 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.



FROM THE DESK OF DENISE RAMSAY



Get the book!



A SONG IN THE DARK
Kimberley Woodhouse

Bestselling author Kimberley Woodhouse has become one of my go-to authors this past year, and I have to say it surprises me a bit—proving the old theory of “don’t judge a book by its cover!” I’ve picked up several of her backlisted books, and each one has gripped me from the beginning, whether it’s about cyber-terrorism, a paleontologist, or her newest WW2 novel.

With over two dozen books and a music career under her belt, she is a prolific author. I still have some titles I need to grab for a lazy day of reading, though I’m not sure I need more on my TBR pile. But when you find an author you enjoy, you really have no other choice.

A Song in the Dark is an exceptionally well-researched WWII fiction novel that will keep you engrossed from beginning to end. I started reading the book on a plane and read into the night until I finished it.

Written against the background of an impending war, Chaisley Frappier is a world-renowned pianist embarking on a European tour. She is blind, although the world does not yet know it. When she

discovers Hitler’s escalating obsession with ridding the nation of disabled individuals, she realizes her unique position to help those threatened. Her new driver, Rick Zimmerman, has a secret of his own, and together they find themselves in dangerous situations that take every bit of their faith and courage to triumph over hate—and survive.

Woodhouse crafted a stirring story of fighting for hope, love, and justice amid the tumultuous European continent on the brink of war. She has woven in so much depth that evokes emotions of admiration, disgust, sadness, fear, hope, love, devotion, and, most importantly, faith. It may end up being one of my top books of 2026.



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.

A Prayer for Valentine’s Day

By Scotty Smith

Source: www.thegospelcoalition.org

“I am my beloved’s, and his desire is for me” (Song of Solomon 7:10 ESV).

Gracious Jesus, it’s the day in our culture in which red hearts, overpriced cards, dark chocolates, and cut flowers abound—Valentine’s Day is upon us. For some, it’s a day of incredible kindness, sweetness, and gratitude. For others, this day magnifies brokenness, loneliness, and emptiness. For all of us, it should be a day in which our longings for intimacy and rich connection find their way home to you, Jesus, the consummate lover.

How fitting that I’m presently thirty-five thousand feet in the air somewhere between Dallas and Nashville, for as I contemplate the wonders of your love this morning, my heart soars to regions where your mercy is endless, your grace abounds, and your love is lavish. Oh, to more fully grasp the liberating implications of this heart-thrilling affirmation: “I am my beloved’s, and his desire is for me.” How can this be so? How can this really be true? I believe; help my unbelief.

Grace me with a deeper and richer experience of belonging to you, Jesus. I’m no longer my own, hallelujah! You died for me; you bought me; you married yourself to me. You actually desire me, want me, enjoy me... you are the ultimate Spouse. All I really need in life, and in death, is your love, Lord Jesus. This is my unquestioned theology; make it ever-pulsating doxology.

Indeed, free me from the insidious thievery of my unbelief. One moment I believe you truly delight in me and rejoice over me with singing, and the next I can be filled with disorienting unbelief. That’s when I place unrealistic demands on other relationships. But there’s no one human being (or any number of them)—there’s no other romance story, no torrid love affair that can possibly fill the God-shaped vacuum in my soul.

Even the best marriage is merely a hint and whisper of what it means to belong to you. Even the worst marriage can become a garden in a desert where you meet us, free us and overwhelm us with your all-sufficient love.

Oh, for the day when my betrothal becomes the day of great banqueting—the day I long for more than any other—the wedding feast of the Lamb. Until that day, free me to love others as you love me. You are enough, Jesus, more than enough. So very Amen I pray, in your tender and tenacious name.



Scotty Smith is the founding pastor of Christ Community Church in Franklin, Tennessee. You can follow him at x.com/ScottyWardSmith.

Life in God's Family

Part 2 of a 3-Part Series: Communion



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 part one of this "Life in God's Family" series, we spoke about how Christians are adopted into the family of God by His Spirit, and how Christians symbolically and publicly display this new association through baptism. Another practice in which Christians participate as part of God's family is communion. This practice is mysterious or somewhat strange to most Christians, as it seems like a simple memorial where we eat a small cracker or piece of bread and drink some juice (or...*gasp*... wine). To help understand this practice, let's take a step back and remember what was happening when Christ established communion.

Jesus is called "our Passover lamb" in 1 Corinthians 5:7. His crucifixion occurred during the Passover week, and during that week, the Passover meal was eaten. In Mark 14:12-16, Jesus' disciples ask Him where they should go to prepare the Passover meal, and Jesus gives them instructions. Matthew and Mark both state that "as they were eating" Jesus took the unleavened bread and broke it (Matt. 26:26; Mark 14:22). This means they were already eating when they broke the bread. Luke 22:17 states that Jesus passed around a cup from which each disciple took a portion, and He did this "when he had given thanks." This means the breaking of bread happened after the disciples had eaten the Passover meal, drunk the second of four cups of wine in the Passover meal, had given the Seder blessing, and were refilling their cups for the third cup.

Why is this significant?

Early in the Passover meal, someone breaks one piece of unleavened bread and hides half. It's said that this hidden piece of bread is "held ransom" and called the "afikomen" (the dessert). There is then a retelling of how God saved Israel from Egypt and brought them out of the land of slavery,

along with the specific Passover meal: eating some unleavened bread, the bitter herbs, the lamb, and drinking two cups of wine. Once they bring back the afikomen and drink the third cup of wine, they break the afikomen among the attendees, and a special blessing is given:

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who sustains the entire world with goodness, grace, loving kindness, and compassion. He gives bread to all, for His grace is everlasting. And in His great goodness we have never lacked anything, and we will never be deprived of food for the sake of His great name. For He is God who provides for all and does good for all and prepares food for all His creatures that He created. Blessed are You, Lord, who provides for all.

God and God of our ancestors, may You remember us on this day of Passover to bless us with kindness and mercy for a life of peace and happiness.

We pray that He who establishes peace in the heavens grant peace for us, for all Israel, and all of mankind, and let us say, Amen.

It was following this special blessing, as Jesus was handing out the pieces of the afikomen, that He said, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19).

It was following this special blessing, as Jesus drank the third cup with his disciples, that He said, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many" (Luke 22:24).

Jesus was saying that the afikomen, hidden and "held ransom," was the ransom for **us**.



Jesus was saying that the Lord our God, who sustains the entire world, was **Him**.

Jesus was saying that God our provider, who provides for all, was **Him**.

Jesus was saying that the blessing of kindness and mercy for a life of peace and happiness was going to come from **Him**.

Jesus was saying that **He** was going to establish peace in the heavens for us, all Israel, and all humanity.

Jesus was saying that the prayer of the Passover, the prayer for blessing, kindness, mercy, life, peace, happiness, and true spiritual food for Israel and all people, would come through His **body and blood**.

Guess what?

Every bit of that was true.

He was our ransom (1 Tim. 2:5-6).

He is the sustainer of and provider for all creation (Heb. 1:3).

He is the one who gives life and peace (Rom. 5:1, 18-21).

He fulfilled the promise of the new covenant (Heb. 8-9).

Not only that, but when the third cup of wine was drunk, there immediately followed a refill and a fourth cup of wine. At this time in the Passover, someone opens the home's door to symbolically welcome Elijah, and they sing the song "Eliyahu Hanavi."

"Elijah the Prophet, Elijah the Tishbite, Elijah the Giladite, may he come speedily to us in our days, along with Messiah the Son of David."

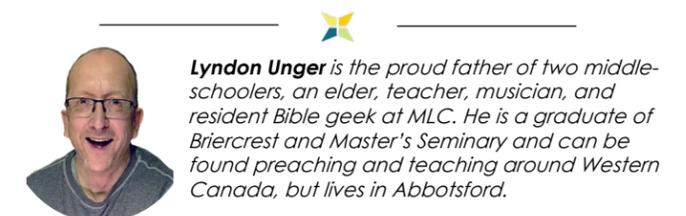
News flash: Elijah had already come (Matt. 11:13-14) and Jesus was the Messiah, the son of David.

Jesus was **the one**.

So, Jesus changed the Passover meal from one of remembrance of God saving Israel from their slavery in Egypt to one of remembrance of Jesus saving Christians from their slavery to sin. This is why Paul says to the Corinthians, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26).

When we take communion, we should remember how Christ has saved us from our sin and joyfully partake, proclaiming through our actions the reality that Christ saved us from sin. That's also why Paul wants us to examine ourselves beforehand (1 Cor. 11:28) so that we don't have outstanding, unrepentant sin in our lives. Anyone who claims to be a Christian and partakes in communion while living a life of sin eats and drinks judgment upon themselves (1 Cor. 11:29). Your association becomes one of guilt rather than redemption. In other words, you become guilty of Jesus' murder rather than a beneficiary of His redeeming work; His purchase of believers from the slave market of sin.

May communion be a continual reminder of the blessings, promises, and life that are all made available in Christ, and a reminder to live lives worthy of our profession.



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.



My International Faith Journey



By Katherine Charlton

It has been nearly three years since I moved to South Korea, a decision that marked the beginning of a transformation in me.

For those who do not know me, I was born in 2000 to my parents, Darren and Nancy Charlton, and was one of the many children who grew up in Mill Lake Church, which I attended until early 2023. Mill Lake Church was where I first learned about Christ, but for many years, I only interacted with faith as an inheritance of childhood circumstances.

At the time of my move abroad, I'd arrived at a serious juncture. It became necessary to shed a belief that was rooted in passivity and exchange it for a personal conviction, something I was struggling with. In the midst of university, work, and my social life, God had taken a backseat.

Leading up to my departure, I underwent several major life changes and reached out to God more frequently in search of a sense of stability. Almost immediately, I felt God answering my prayers. I landed a teaching job in Ulsan, South Korea, and my prayers over the visa process were all answered. It was as though He'd been waiting patiently

for my return and, once I did, He made my way unmistakably clear.

I look back on the first two years of my time in South Korea as a time of rest and renewal. God filled my life with people and experiences that brought me joy—in particular, Journey English Church, where I met my fiancé.

Journey, being a small church made up of Christians from around the world, gave me countless growth opportunities. I enjoyed conversations and perspectives from Christians with unique experiences and a vast wealth of knowledge. This challenged me and motivated me to think more deeply about faith. God used all these relationships to strengthen and encourage me.

As my passion deepened, I joined the Journey Church leadership team and began serving. I found a renewed love for reading Scripture and an interest in theology. God, in a deeply personal way, considering my love for books, answered this new passion with yet another rich blessing. When a co-worker returned to his home country after twenty years in Korea, he gifted me with over fifty books on theology that he had accumulated.

Prayer became a regular part of my routine. In particular, on the days I walked home during sunset or stood atop one of Korea's many mountains, where everything felt right with the world. Many of these prayers, happily, were in thanks for the abundant blessings God had given me, and for bringing me to still waters after a difficult time. I also began praying that though I was thankful for all He'd done, I knew difficult times would come again, and was now prepared to walk through them in unwavering faith.

Those difficult times arrived at the start of my third year in Korea, when surgical complications left my dad in a medically induced coma. This was a shock to my entire family, leaving me reeling in a state of unreality. A couple of weeks passed with difficult changes of prognosis until I received the call I'd been dreading, telling me it was time to come home. I booked my flight immediately.

By the time I arrived, the prognosis had changed once again, allowing a window of hope. I spent the following weeks with my family, driving back and forth from St. Paul's hospital, praying, and enduring the changing status of my dad's health.

Near the end of April, we reached the day we felt was coming—we were told it was best to remove Dad from care. I don't think I have the words to describe the feeling of the days that followed. The lives of our family changed in a way that is too difficult to fully comprehend.

Grief has been a long and arduous process. I think back often to the prayer I made many times in my first two years in Korea, that I'd be ready to weather the next storm without wavering. In light of it, I think it would be easy to interpret this year as God's way of testing me. Instead, I believe the first two years were a preparation. God filled my cup until it overflowed so that I would have the strength and faith to withstand the next chapter.

I often think of Ecclesiastes 3, which aptly summarizes what God has been teaching me in the last several years. There is a time for everything, the purpose of which sometimes only God knows, but we should take joy in all times and all tasks God has given us.

In the months since my dad's passing, I have experienced a strange but consistent feeling that I cannot wholly describe. Through the grief, I feel an unexplainable peace and a joy in Christ that carries me through.



Katherine Charlton is an English teacher living abroad in Busan, South Korea. She currently serves on the Ulsan Journey English Church leadership team and grew up attending Mill Lake Church. When she isn't working, she can be found hiking, reading, playing with her cat, or planning her May wedding to Jarrod Hong in South Korea.

MILL LAKE Women
2 Winter Bible Studies for Women

Sign up in the church lobby OR
text Ann @ 604.808.7734



Morning

FREEDOM THRU FORGIVENESS

a 5-week study — \$20
with Belma Ruth Reimer
Wed. Feb 4 to Mar 4
Chat & Snack @ 9:30
Study @ 10:00 – 11:30 a.m.

Evening

DARING JOY

a 7-week study — \$35
Facilitator: Denise Ramsay
Mon. Feb 2 to Mar 23
Chat & Snack @ 6:30
Study @ 7:00 – 8:30 p.m.

SHARE your STORIES⁺

TALENTS + PHOTOS + THOUGHTS

Send them to: ann@milllakechurch.ca

Showing Love

By Johanna Campbell



"I love you! Will you be my Valentine?"

Valentine's Day (February 14) has become a day to give love cards, gifts, roses, and hugs to friends, relatives, and lovers. We say, "You're my Valentine," meaning "I love you in a special way."

In the English language, we have only one word for love. In Old English, that word was 'charity.' In the King James Version of the Bible, 1 Corinthians 13 (known as the love chapter) reads: "Charity never faileth" (v. 8). Modern translations use the word 'love' instead of 'charity.' C. S. Lewis wrote a book entitled *The Four Loves* showing how the Greek language has four words for love: **storge**, **phileo**, **eros** and **agape**—not just one word, as in the English language.



Storge is the Greek word for familial love as displayed between parents and children or siblings among themselves. Abraham showed this type of love to Isaac. God spoke to him, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you" (Genesis 22:2 NIV). By his willingness to sacrifice his only son, Abraham showed he feared God and trusted Him completely, foreshadowing the sacrifice of God's only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Abraham loved Isaac with a storge love.

Phileo is the Greek word for brotherly love between friends, such as the friendship of David and Jonathan described in 1 Samuel 18:1 (NIV): "After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself." He promised to love Jonathan until death and to remember his offspring when David ascended the throne in the place of King Saul, Jonathan's father. This type of love mirrors God's faithful covenant love for His children.

The love between Jacob and Rachel reflects **Eros**, the Greek word for passionate, physical love. Jacob served Laban for fourteen years to get Rachel, "but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her" (Genesis 29:20 NIV). A couple develops eros during their engagement but may only fully realize it when married.

Agape is the highest form of love. The 1 Corinthians 13 passage uses the word seven times. We all know John 3:16 (NIV): "For God so loved (agape) the world that He gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." Romans 5:8 (NIV) uses the same verb: "But God demonstrates His own [agape] love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Jesus showed the full extent of His love to us by dying in our place. Jesus said to His disciples, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13 NIV). Agape love is pure, selfless, sacrificial, and willful love. God is love (1 John 4:8). The Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—exists in a pure, perfect love to one another.

These four loves that C. S. Lewis mentioned often intertwine and can overlap. However, agape love is the highest form of love, which Jesus asks us to live out in the church. We are to sacrifice ourselves for the benefit of our brothers and sisters in Christ. We

are to mirror Christ's agape love in the Church of Christ, which is His Body.

The Old Testament command was: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:5 NIV). Jesus repeated that command in Mark 12:30, adding the word 'mind' to the list. He later gave us a new commandment: We are to love one another in the same way He loves us, which is self-sacrificing, undying, agape love. By nature, we don't love God or our neighbour. We must be born again to enter God's kingdom of love. Then the Spirit of God enables us to love one another with agape love, with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

We show we love God by loving our neighbour (1 John 3:1–15). The apostle Paul admonishes the believers in Rome to show their love to one another in the following ways: "Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Live in harmony with one another" (Romans 12:9–10, 13, 16). The Apostle Peter exhorts the scattered believers in Asia Minor: "Above all, love each other deeply" or as the KJV Bible reads: "Have fervent charity among yourselves" (1 Peter 4:8).

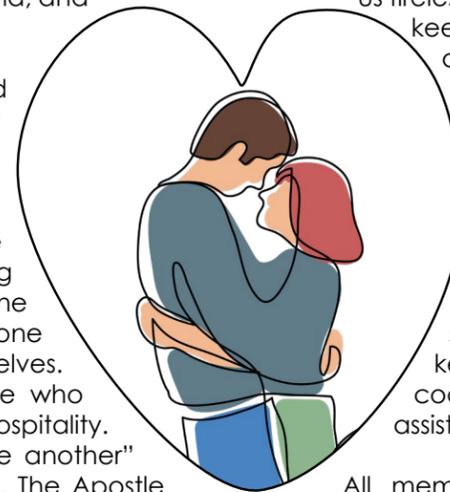
Dr. Gary Chapman has given married couples five ways to show love to one another: giving gifts, spending quality time with one another, speaking words of affirmation, performing acts of service for one another, and physical touching of one another.¹ Agape love is the greatest gift we can give our neighbour, showing that we love them for Christ's sake.

I like Dr. Voddie Baucham's definition of love: "Love is an act of the will accompanied by emotion that leads to action on behalf of its object."² When we love our neighbour as ourselves, it is an act of the will—our mind is involved. When we love our spouse, it is not an ethereal, vague emotion; it's an act of our will. That is why God commands husbands to love their wives (Ephesians 5:25). It is not a suggestion;

it is a command. Wives are called to love and respect their husbands. Again, it is a command, not a suggestion. Wives and husbands are called to love their children. Children are commanded to honour, respect, and love their parents, for this pleases the Lord (Colossians 3:18–21). Agape love, which is pure, selfless, sacrificial, and willful love, is a fruit of the Holy Spirit living within us.

We see many examples of agape love at Mill Lake Church. Before Christmas, the Women's Ministry Team brought fourteen care packages to each of the shut-ins and widows in our church family. Pastor Randy, the elders, and ministry teams serve us tirelessly with their gifts, time, and talents. Others keep our church spotless for each service and meeting; still others use their creative gifts to beautify our church building. The Branches team offers gifts of writing, creativity, and gleaning content to encourage us in our faith journey. The Prayer and Care team visits the sick and helps those who are in need or lonely. Our office administrator serves in the office to keep our church running smoothly and well-informed; our treasurer keeps track of our finances. Our rentals coordinator organizes outside rentals and assists them with their needs.

All members linger to talk with one another, encourage one another, or welcome newcomers to the church. We practice hospitality to the stranger and use our gifts, talents, and time to serve our entire community. We are a family of God's children tied together with a bond of love, agape love, that shines through us to one another and to those around us in the city of Abbotsford. What a blessing! We don't just show love on Valentine's Day; we show love throughout the year.



1. See Dr. Gary Chapman's book: *The Five Love Languages*.
2. See Dr. Voddie Baucham's *Love and Marriage* sermon series.
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8TW1AOTICQ&t=3582s>)



Johanna Campbell, DTh, is a member of Mill Lake's Prayer and Care Team and has served at Mill Lake Church in varied capacities for over thirty-eight years.

SINGLE, BUT NOT LONELY.

By John Lee
Source: www.desiringgod.org

Singleness can feel like the participation trophy in the game of life. The default for the relationally dismayed. The “gift” no one asked for.

That assessment, however, couldn't be further from reality. And I say that as a still-single man who aspires to marry. All of us experience singleness. And even for those who do marry, more than half will be single again. God cares about our unmarried years. He desires all of us to make the most of them. So, what steps can we take to steward these years well?

1. Define Your Gift

The apostle Paul makes an audacious claim. Whereas in Genesis 2 God observes “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18), Paul tells the unmarried and the widows that “it is good for them to remain single, as I am” (1 Corinthians 7:8). Paul, when looking at the new-covenant community, doesn't see marriagelessness as a curse, but as a gift. He says, “I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another” (1 Corinthians 7:7).

I've spoken to dear saints who desire marriage and do not have the life they expected. If that describes you, God has not abandoned you. You're not stuck in a waiting room between celibacy and marriage. God desires His good, perfect, delightful will for you right now. James reminds us, “Every good and perfect gift is from above” (James 1:17) — and Paul could certainly add, “even your singleness.”

2. Discern the Advantages

What about singleness makes it a gift? What does singleness offer that marriage doesn't? If we cannot name the advantages that come with singleness, then despite our insistence that singleness is a gift,

we don't have much to offer to those who are living a single life.

Paul puts the advantages of singleness under the phrase “undivided devotion.”

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord. (1 Corinthians 7:32–35)

When I read those verses and reflect on the advantages of singleness, I see at least three.

Singles can say yes more often.

Focus

In a world full of distraction, singleness enables us to focus on Jesus “without distraction.” This isn't to say that we cannot honor Christ if we're married—God desires married couples to love and serve each other for His glory (Ephesians 5:22–33). But singles can devote themselves to Him with fewer disruptions from good but competing desires.

As singles, we're able to be single-minded. We can focus on honoring our Lord without the complexities of a spouse and children. Quiet mornings with Bible reading and prayer. Ministering to others without being interrupted by naps and diaper-changes. Fellowship without a curfew. Decisions about the future oriented toward gospel good without weighing familial costs. Singleness allows for undivided focus.

Flexibility

“Let me check with my spouse” is probably the most frequent response to an invitation extended to a married member at my church. Singles are advantaged in not carrying the weight of

accounting for another person. We can say yes more often.

When a church member texts me at 11:30 p.m. asking to meet to read the Bible, I can say yes. When a family at the church needs emergency babysitting, I can say yes. When life presents risky, God-glorifying opportunities, I can say yes. Singles' capacity allows us to flex for the sake of the kingdom.

Freedom

Paul states his desire for singles by saying, “I want you to be free from anxieties” (1 Corinthians 7:32). Freedom from the obligations of marriage enables singles to do what married people cannot. Whereas marriage is helped by stable routine and clear obligations, singleness provides mobility.

Valuing singleness doesn't diminish the value or dignity of marriage. Paul wrote both 1 Corinthians 7 and Ephesians 5. He can exalt the value of marriage and express his preference for singleness. Singleness provides good opportunities that marriage does not.

3. Desire and Be Content

What about singles who deeply desire marriage? How can we endure seasons of discontentment? We need to clarify what we mean when we talk about contentment. Paul writes to the Philippians,

I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. (Philippians 4:10–14)

First, you can be content in singleness while desiring to be married. Paul thanks the Philippians for assisting him while in prison. I don't think Paul is telling the Philippians that he desires to stay in prison because he is content in all circumstances.

Between being hungry or well fed, he prefers being fed (“It was kind of you to share my trouble”).

Desire and contentment are two different realities. You can desire marriage while still being content in seasons of singleness. If you are single and desire to be married, then, don't feel guilty about that desire. Proverbs 18:22 says, “He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord.” Enjoy your singleness and look for a spouse!

Second, contentment sees the goodness of God in one's circumstances, not detached from them. Do not try to find your ultimate satisfaction in the future fulfillment of a spouse. Find your satisfaction in Christ in your season of singleness. Our focus in singleness should not be primarily oriented toward the hope of future marriage. Our faithfulness in singleness is valuable because it honors Christ. As Sam Allberry says, “If marriage shows us the shape of the gospel, singleness shows us its sufficiency” (7 Myths About Singleness, 120).

Third, you can be content in singleness and still struggle with the difficulties that come with singleness. We intuitively understand this about marriage. Difficulties in marriage don't necessarily mean discontentment in marriage (though it can

You can desire marriage while still being content in seasons of singleness.

certainly lead there). Christ can handle our delights and our disappointments. You can be honest about the difficulties of singleness while trusting Christ “in any and every circumstance” (Philippians 4:12).

4. Devote Yourself to a Church Family

In Mark 10:29–31, Jesus says,

Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this

Continued on next page

Continued from last page

time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.

Jesus promises us a family worth a hundred times more than anything we may leave — now, in this time. The family that Jesus promises is His church.

Here's an excerpt from our church's covenant:

We . . . promise to watch over one another in brotherly love; to remember one another in prayer; to rejoice at each other's happiness; to aid one another in sickness and distress; to cultivate Christian sympathy in feeling and Christian courtesy in speech; to restore one another through discipline; to be slow to take offense, but always ready to reconcile immediately in obedience to Jesus, the head of our church.

What does that sound like? It sounds like a marriage vow. Commitment to a church provides an explicit, mutual responsibility in a spiritual, familial relationship. For a Christian, then, a single life need not be a lonely life. The most practical ways you can practice undivided devotion to Christ will come through a love for His church (John 13:34-35).

Single, Not Lonely

Life in the local church enables me to serve in ways I can't alone. I get to babysit children while their parents go on dates. I get to go out of my way to

spend time with a shut-in that lives further away. I get to use my time to serve in ways that would be difficult for other members in the church. There is no selfish singleness in the kingdom of God. While married Christians expend most of their energy for their physical family, I get to expend most of my energy for my spiritual family.

Living with the local church also lets me depend on other Christians in times of need. A warm, home-cooked meal is a phone call away. Church members who know me cry with me, challenge me, and encourage me as I pursue Christlikeness. It doesn't mean they love me perfectly (I don't love them perfectly either), but in this life, my church has been as precious to me as brothers, sisters, mother, father, or children.

Singleness has its fair share of joys, difficulties, and opportunities. But our faithfulness now displays our hope in future glory, when people will "neither marry nor [be] given in marriage" (Matthew 22:30), because we'll see our Bridegroom face to face. And when we see Him, we'll know that the investment we made in this season was worth it.



John Lee is the lead pastor of First Baptist Church of Artesia.



gathering
market

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

www.gatheringmarket.com



God's Preferential Option *for the* Poor in Spirit

By Betsy Childs Howard
Source: www.thegospelcoalition.org

"God sides with the poor against the rich."

This is the message of liberation theology, a movement that arose in Latin America in the mid-20th century. Liberation theologians and their ideological descendants believe that God has a "preferential option for the poor." In the words of Gustavo Gutiérrez, regarded as the movement's founder, "God demonstrates a special predilection toward those who have been excluded from the banquet of life."

Evangelical Protestants recoil from this kind of theology. The Reformation trumpeted the great truth of Scripture that we are saved by grace through faith on the merits of Jesus Christ, not based on any good work or worth in ourselves. To say that God chooses people because they are poor negates the idea of His unmerited favor.

Still, one can hardly read through a book of the Bible without being confronted with strong statements about God's love and blessing of the poor and warnings about the perils of wealth. So how do faithful readers respond?

Christians typically either downplay the plethora of scriptural warnings about riches or they so emphasize them that wealth becomes the ultimate evil. It is as if our eyes cannot focus at the same time upon the gospel of Jesus and also His teaching about the poor. I suggest, however, that these twin currents in Scripture are neither in tension nor irreconcilable. In fact, the great message of the gospel is that God has a preferential option for the poor in spirit.

Danger of Wealth

Wealth is dangerous for our souls. Jesus famously said that it is easier for a camel to go through the

eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven (though with God all things are possible).

James gives a similar warning: "Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits" (James 1:9-11).

Wealth is dangerous, according to this passage and others like it, because it seems permanent but is actually fleeting. Money gives the illusion of security, but it does nothing to remove our mortal fragility. John Piper writes that wealth is "the great symbol of self-sufficiency." The rich man knows that, should he fall, layer upon layer of safety net will catch him. His lack of material need acts like an anesthetic, making him numb to his spiritual need.

Poverty and Poverty in Spirit

There is more than a metaphorical connection between poverty and poverty of spirit. Situational poverty encourages poverty of spirit. The father who cannot afford to buy medicine for his child knows what it is to need divine intervention. The poor are less tempted to seek their joy and their home in this life, and so they anticipate the next. Jesus said the poor in spirit are blessed because theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:3). They are not happy because they are poor; they are happy because something better lies ahead of them.

As Jesus did, James connects poverty with eternal reward. He writes, "Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which

he has promised to those who love him?" (James 2:5). There is a great deal of deep theology packed into this verse. The context in the chapter makes it clear that James is talking about economic poverty when he refers to the "poor in the world." But he goes on to say that the poor are spiritually rich. Their poverty itself has no merit; rather, the rich faith that correlates with poverty will make them heirs of the kingdom of God.

In his book *Word and Deed*, Duane Litfin writes, "Wealth, and the power that typically travels with it, often deceive and corrupt (Matt. 13:22; Mark 4:9; 1 Tim. 6:9-10), making it harder for the rich and powerful to humble themselves in dependence on God (Mark 10:22-25). The poor, by contrast, are far more conscious of their need and thus more willing to entrust themselves to God." To the extent that poverty makes a person know his need for God, poverty is a spiritual good.

Danger of Poverty

So, what is the difference between liberation theology's preferential option for the poor and God's preferential option for the poor in spirit? The key lies in recognizing that poverty does no good unless it leads to richness of faith. Poverty embraced for its own sake is as spiritually dangerous as wealth. Riches are not intrinsically evil; they are dangerous because they give us a sense of security in what will ultimately waste away (James 5:1-6).

Far too many Christians have rightly recognized the Bible's emphasis on poverty, but have stopped there. They view economic equality, rather than a right relationship with the King of kings, as the end goal of the church. Those of us living in the developed world who have more than we need can start to view our wealth as our guilt. Tragically, this way of thinking leads us to believe that it is possible to save ourselves from wealth, but we can never save ourselves from the wages of our sin.

Those who choose poverty or simplicity as a way of making themselves righteous live under just as much of an illusion as the wealthy man who thinks his wealth can save him from anything. Some of us need to repent of what Alan Carter has called "old car righteousness." Christians who choose altruistic professions without a lot of income or who "live simply so that others can simply live"

can quickly become self-righteous about their poverty. Being proud that you drive an old car is as sinful as being proud that you drive a new car. If living with less makes you feel better about yourself and more worthy of God's love and respect, it will make you prideful of spirit rather than poor in spirit. Thus, poverty, if it leads to spiritual pride, can itself pose a danger to our souls.

If poverty does not lead to faith, it is worthless to us, for "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hebrews 11:6a).

Fall Far Short

Is there any hope, then, for the earnest disciple? Is there a way to pass safely through the Scylla and Charybdis of wealth and self-righteousness?

First, we should give sacrificially. Rather than continually building bigger financial barns to protect ourselves from any eventuality, we should give to the point that we feel it and know what it is to depend on God to meet our needs. This doesn't mean that we should categorically rule out health insurance, savings, or retirement plans, but it means they should all be put at God's disposal. Sacrificial giving reminds us that the only lasting treasure is heavenly treasure. We should seek to use the wealth we have to encourage poverty of spirit in ourselves and others.

Second, even as we heed Jesus' warnings about wealth with eternal seriousness, we must always remember that we have and will fall far short of the righteous life that God desires. When we trust in our savings or buying our way out of a jam rather than falling on our knees, we must look to our elder brother, God's original heir, to be our righteousness. The kingdom of God belongs to the poor in spirit, not because they have earned it, but because they have been given the inheritance of the Son of the King.



Betsy Childs Howard is an editor for *The Gospel Coalition*. She is the author of *Seasons of Waiting* and the children's books: *Arlo and the Great Big Cover-Up*, *Polly and the Screen Time Overload*, and *Arlo and the Keep-Out Club*. Betsy and her husband, Bernard, live with their two little boys in Birmingham, Alabama.



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 February:

FEBRUARY 1

FAMILY SUNDAY

Worship with our church family (student activity packs available at Connect).

FEBRUARY 8

Hannah Prayed (1 Samuel 1)

God wants people to communicate with Him through praying and reading the Bible daily.

FEBRUARY 15

A Widow Helped Elijah (1 Kings 17:1, 8-16)

People can learn about and recognize God's authority.

FEBRUARY 22

Esther Helped Her People

(Esther 2:2-18; 3:8-13; 4-5; 7-8)

People can trust God even when difficult things happen

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!

MEMORY VERSE

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make straight your paths.

Proverbs 3:5-6



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



FAMILY DISCIPLESHIP



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. Gen 33; Mk 4; Est 9–10; Rom 4
- 2. Gen 34; Mk 5; Job 1; Rom 5
- 3. Gen 35–36; Mk 6; Job 2; Rom 6
- 4. Gen 37; Mk 7; Job 3; Rom 7
- 5. Gen 38; Mk 8; Job 4; Rom 8
- 6. Gen 39; Mk 9; Job 5; Rom 9
- 7. Gen 40; Mk 10; Job 6; Rom 10
- 8. Gen 41; Mk 11; Job 7; Rom 11
- 9. Gen 42; Mk 12; Job 8; Rom 12
- 10. Gen 43; Mk 13; Job 9; Rom 13
- 11. Gen 44; Mk 14; Job 10; Rom 14
- 12. Gen 45; Mk 15; Job 11; Rom 15
- 13. Gen 46; Mk 16; Job 12; Rom 16
- 14. Gen 47; Lk 1:1–38; Job 13; 1 Cor 1
- 15. Gen 48; Lk 1:39–80; Job 14; 1 Cor 2
- 16. Gen 49; Lk 2; Job 15; 1 Cor 3
- 17. Gen 50; Lk 3; Job 16–17; 1 Cor 4
- 18. Ex 1; Lk 4; Job 18; 1 Cor 5
- 19. Ex 2; Lk 5; Job 19; 1 Cor 6
- 20. Ex 3; Lk 6; Job 20; 1 Cor 7
- 21. Ex 4; Lk 7; Job 21; 1 Cor 8
- 22. Ex 5; Lk 8; Job 22; 1 Cor 9
- 23. Ex 6; Lk 9; Job 23; 1 Cor 10
- 24. Ex 7; Lk 10; Job 24; 1 Cor 11
- 25. Ex 8; Lk 11; Job 25; 1 Cor 12
- 26. Ex 9; Lk 12; Job 26; 1 Cor 13
- 27. Ex 10; Lk 13; Job 27; 1 Cor 14
- 28. Ex 11:1–12:21; Lk 14; Job 28; 1 Cor 15

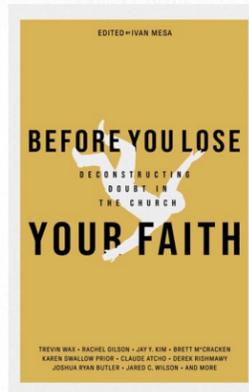
PASTOR RANDY'S RECOMMENDED READING

BEFORE YOU LOSE YOUR FAITH

Edited by Evan Messa

Many young people are walking away from Christianity—for reasons ranging from the church's stance on sexual morality, to its approach to science and the Bible, to its perceived silence on racial justice.

For anyone entering college or the workplace and looking for a timely reminder of why Christianity is good news in a skeptical age, I recommend *Before You Lose Your Faith: Deconstructing Doubt in the Church*. It is an infusion of hope, clarity, and wisdom in an age of mounting cynicism toward Christianity. *Before You Lose Your Faith* features contributors such as Claude Atcho, Rachel Gilson, Jay Y. Kim, Brett McCracken, Karen Swallow Prior, Derek Rishmawy, and Jared C. Wilson. This book shows that deconstructing need not end in unbelief and can help build up a more mature, robust faith that grapples honestly with the deepest questions of life.



MUSIC Moment

BLESSED

By Vertical Worship

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

