

Accepting God's Invitation  
*to a More Fulfilling Life*

A

GENEROUS  
BECKONING



PETER M. WALLACE

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PETER M. WALLACE

FORWARD MOVEMENT  
Cincinnati, Ohio



## *Dedication*

For five dear Episcopal priests who have mentored and inspired me over the years:  
the Rev. Canon Gray Temple, Jr.,  
the Rev. Canon Louis C. “Skip” Schueddig,  
the Rev. James Hagen,  
the Rev. Allan Sandlin, and  
the Rev. Canon Scott Gunn.

They represent countless others who have enriched my life deeply and helped to form me as a priest and as a human..



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*God woos us with...*  
*A Generous Beckoning*

## Introduction

*Listening for God's Invitations  
in Three Dimensions*

### What Is God Saying to You?

Elijah was scared to death. The prophet's bold proclamations had gotten him in big trouble with the powers that be, and a furious Queen Jezebel had put a generous price on his head.

For forty days and forty nights, Elijah ran for his life all the way to the mountain of God, Mount Horeb, where he collapsed, exhausted, in a cave. And slept.

At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." He said, "Go out and stand on the

mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”  
(1 Kings 19:9-13)

You may not be holed up in a cave in the wilderness, but you may feel a lot like Elijah.

Running for your life.

Exhausted by the seemingly perpetual battle for survival in this world.

Aching for God’s presence.

Frustrated that you have done so many of the right things with so little to show for it except heartache.

Yearning to hear the voice of God for you.

And wondering, “What are you doing here?”

Sometimes, God's message for you is right there in front of you: a quiet whisper, the "sound of sheer silence," easily ignored, easy to overlook.

My goal in these pages is to help you listen carefully for what God is saying to you today, what God is inviting into your life. As we journey together through a variety of texts throughout the Bible, each springing from a verb in the imperative case, I hope we will train our spiritual ears and eyes to see God beckoning generously to us, ever coaxing us to come closer, inviting us to experience life in all its fullness.

The Bible is soaked through and through with God's desire to bring us closer into a divine, loving embrace. In a meeting of an interfaith association once, I heard a Muslim woman quote a verse from the *Hadith Qudsi*, the sayings of Prophet Muhammed, in which God says:

"If he draws near to Me a hand's span, I draw near to him an arm's length; and if he draws near to Me an arm's length, I draw near to him a fathom's length. And if he comes to Me walking, I go to him running."<sup>1</sup>

God in Three Persons yearns for you.

Jesus expresses anguish over the folks who seem to have no interest in the lavish gifts he wants to share:

For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so

that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them. (Matthew 13:15)

Beloved sibling, Jesus wants to heal you. Fill you. Embrace you. Share with you. Encourage you. Challenge you. But you must be alert to his invitations to come and follow.

It all starts with listening, really listening, for what God is saying to you. Right from the pages of the Bible.

### **What Are You Saying to God?**

Whether you're a seeker taking initial steps in your pursuit of God, or you've been a Christian for many years but desire a fresh, true encounter with God in your daily life, this book offers you opportunities to hear and wrestle with God's imperatives—invitations, admonitions, challenges, and commands—to you.

This book will have the most benefit to you if you are earnestly seeking the kind of help it offers. That is, you have certain needs you want fulfilled—and you're asking God to fulfill them:

*“God, I want to hear you.”*

Perhaps you are feeling frustrated because there is a disconnect between God's Word and your daily life. You live in a world whose distracting roar keeps you from hearing the “sheer

sound of silence” of God’s presence. It seems you can’t hear God speaking personally to you, so you fail to achieve the spiritual potential God has for you.

This book is designed to enable you to hear God speak to you through powerful passages from the Old and New Testaments, and to help you grasp the full magnitude of what God’s imperatives can mean to you as a child of God.

*“God, I want to experience you more fully in my daily life.”*

The Bible is a big book full of stories and teachings for God’s children to read, understand, and follow—or, as Episcopalians like to say, to hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest. It takes a lifetime to interact with the Bible, to apply it, and to live it.

This book will help you focus on God’s words to you, so you can come to know God better and accept the invitation to a deeper, richer, more authentic relationship with God in Three Persons:

Father, Son, Holy Spirit

Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer

Source, Savior, Sanctifier

Lover, Beloved, Love<sup>2</sup>

Holy Parent, Divine Child, Breath of God

*“God, I want meditations that don’t tell me what to believe but introduce me to you and your word and help me work it out myself.”*

You and I are on this journey together. We are continually trying to figure out how best to relate with God and each other. We are seeking to experience God more genuinely and then to share that experience with each other.

So together, we’ll interact with invitations to you from the Father, the Creator, in the Old Testament. We’ll explore the admonitions to you from the Son, the Redeemer, in the gospels. And we will look at the urgings to you from the Holy Spirit, the Sustainer, in the New Testament Epistles. And I hope when we’re done, we’ll both realize how much closer we’ve grown to God.

### **How Can This Book Enliven the Conversation?**

This is a book of meditations. This means we won’t be studying scholarly theories about Bible passages or debating fine points of theology. We won’t be sidetracked by historical timelines or authorship controversies. Rather, we’re taking God’s Word as we’ve received it at face value. We’re interacting personally—emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually—with what we read there. We’re inviting the Spirit to help us sense the grace, love, and power of God.

You can read *A Generous Beckoning* straight through at any pace. Or you can focus on one devotional segment each day.

Or browse the contents page to find a particular topic that speaks to you on any given day.

When you begin to hear God speaking to you in the scripture, communicating directly to you in commands and invitations and admonitions, then you start to enter into a deeper relationship with God through the Spirit who woos you. You will experience a more authentic spirituality. You'll no longer simply go through the motions or feel too tired or lazy to make the effort and spend the time to pray or read the scripture. Instead, you'll grow increasingly hungry for more—and thirsty for a closer, more vibrant, more trusting, more empowered, and more fulfilling relationship with God.

You see, God wants to heal you. Fill you. Embrace you. Share with you. Encourage you. Challenge you. God wants you to live fully, joyfully, enthusiastically as a child of heaven and to live out that fullness by loving and serving others. God wants all that for you and more. Experiencing it starts with a sensitive, listening heart, a willing spirit, an active mind. Jesus asks you, *“Are your ears awake? Listen. Listen to the Wind Words, the Spirit blowing through the churches”* (Revelation 2:29, The Message).

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***Author's Note:*** I once heard the Rev. Gray Temple, Jr.—my first rector and a beloved mentor—use the phrase “a generous beckoning” in a sermon at St. Patrick's Episcopal Church in Dunwoody, Georgia. Obviously, it stuck with me over the years since. I am grateful for the many ways Gray helped to form my faith and ministry.



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I

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THE  
CREATIVE SOURCE  
AND YOU

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*God the Father's Invitations to You  
from the Old Testament*





# God Beckons You to Trust

## *1. Making Life Happen*

God blessed them, and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

—GENESIS 1:28



God trusts you.

Let that powerful notion sink into your heart. The Bible says human beings were created “in the image of God” (Genesis 1:27). And that nature is marked by creativity, productivity, choice, and authority.

Not only did God create us with the divine image, but also God blessed us. God spoke powerful words of invitation and command over the very first humans, our forebears. And God speaks the same words to you.

In *The Message*, verse 28 reads, “Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge!”

God says, “Go for it!” Make life happen. Reproduce what’s good and holy and true in you, and spread it around to others. Fill the planet with righteousness and justice and holy truth. Exercise fruitful, faithful, servant-like dominion.

“Take charge!”

In creating us as human beings, God has gifted us with all the wisdom and resources and strength we need to fulfill this calling. And we have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us to empower and guide us.

How can we open ourselves up to this truth? How can we accept God’s gracious invitation to “take charge”?

When I became the head of a well-known ecumenical media ministry that’s now more than 75 years old, I must admit the prospects were energizing. The foundation of the organization had been well set and was solid. The sky was the limit.

During the first several months, I was a tornado of energy, making overdue improvements to our weekly radio program,

pursuing new broadcast outlets, restoring neglected relationships with other organizations, revamping our website, and cultivating new donors.

It was energizing because I knew I had to trust and depend on God completely. That's because I didn't have a clue as to what I was doing. I had a wide range of experience that informed me and plenty of smart people to support me. But I was determined to launch out, go all in, approach problems with fresh creativity, believe in this calling, and let myself be invigorated by the potential of this ministry.

After a few years on the job, I started doing the same right, good things in my own strength. I began to function on autopilot, focusing on what I had accomplished. My dependency on God began to slip ever so slightly. My strength ebbed away into exhaustion; my enthusiasm dwindled into negativity. When harder times came for the organization, I had few resources to draw on.

Feel familiar? Is that where you are too? I have been there many times. And I will no doubt return there again. For me, in the more than twenty years since that early time, I have learned—hopefully more times than not—how to keep trusting God and pushing the limits so that the ministry can continue to thrive despite the complex roller coaster of our times.

- ❖ When you find yourself in that place, remember: “God blessed them.” And God blesses you.
- ❖ God blesses you when you lift your eyes to heaven and recognize this invitation to be productive and proactive. When you renew your trust in the God who urges and cheers you on. When you drink deep from the bottomless pool of divine wisdom and strength. When you let go of your own fears and fetters. When you rely on all who have been called along with you.
- ❖ And when God blesses you, then you are set free to prosper.

It won't happen if you don't trust God with everything you are and with everything you have.

And it won't happen if you don't trust that you were created to be part of this amazing responsibility to make life happen.

God trusts you.



*God, I am overwhelmed by the responsibility you place on me, the trust you have in me to serve you in creative and meaningful ways. I accept your challenge. Give me the trust, wisdom, and vision I need to make it happen. For your glory. Amen.*

## *2. Climbing Higher*

Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.

—EXODUS 24:12



God invites Moses to “come up to me...and wait.”

Doesn't that sound familiar?

Doesn't our life sometimes feel as though we are constantly climbing higher and higher, trying to negotiate the crumbling rock around us in order to reach the plateau where God and perfection and security and serenity can be authentically experienced and fully enjoyed? And doesn't it seem like we must constantly wait for all that without ever really reaching it?

We just keep climbing and waiting. And our trust in God fades.

Ernest Shackleton and his crew must have known what that felt like. They sailed for the South Pole in their ship, the *Endurance*, in August 1914. The crew of twenty-seven planned

to make history as the first people (the first white men, at any rate) to cross Antarctica.

But the harsh realities of the Antarctic soon threatened not only the mission but also their very lives. Early on, the *Endurance* became trapped in the ice, where it remained stuck for ten months before the ice crushed the wooden vessel. The men lived on the ice floe for the next five months, then left in lifeboats.

They made it to Elephant Island. They found themselves alone on the rocky, icy island, desperate for help. Shackleton took five men in a lifeboat in a last-ditch attempt at survival. While the remaining crewmen waited, this paltry crew hoped to make it to South Georgia Island, a base for whaling operations. It was eight hundred miles away.

Miraculously, they made it—but they landed on the side of the island *opposite* the inhabited areas.

There's a heart-stopping scene in a motion picture account of their true story in which the crew members hike across the desolate island. Their supplies, food, and wits exhausted, they believe that if they can climb over the mountain and reach the whalers' supply outpost, they will be well on their way home. The climb is treacherous and challenging; slowly they inch their way up the rough, icy, windswept mountain.

The summit finally looms into view—they are nearly there. But when they finally reach the top and look beyond, they see,

stretching into apparent infinity, a whole range of similarly threatening mountains—twenty-six miles of mountains, in fact—that had to be crossed if they were to survive.

Doesn't that just feel like life?

We spend difficult years in school pursuing our life dreams—only to find that the reality of the world affords little in the way of perfection when it comes to job or career.

We work hard at making our relationships and our family life as positive and authentic as we can—and yet the struggles and conflicts only seem to deepen.

We plan and fret and work hard to make ends meet—and a major unexpected expense blindsides us.

We study, we pray, we sacrifice in trying to grow closer to God, to build our faith—and only feel a growing distance that seems impossible to breach.

*“Come up to me...and wait.”*

What was God thinking? What kind of invitation is that?

It's the kind of invitation that builds solid, unshakable, mature faith. It is the kind of good news that develops trust in the God who will meet us there, who will climb with us and wait with us and ultimately give us all the provisions we need.

Shackleton and his five crewmembers succeeded in their incredible mountainous trek. And with the boats sent to rescue those left on Elephant Island, his entire crew—all 27 of them—survived their two-year ordeal. They navigated impossible odds and got through. They made it home.

Trusting in God's help and direction, you can too.



*God, when I have climbed through life expecting something glorious, the last thing I want to do is wait. Give me patience. Build my trust. For I know that the result will be something I will cherish for the rest of my life. Amen.*

### *3. The Utter Truth*

So acknowledge today and take to heart  
that the LORD is God in heaven above and  
on the earth beneath; there is no other.

—DEUTERONOMY 4:39



Moses bears witness to Israel that there is a God. The only God there is. A God who, by the way, is not you.

When I am stewing in fear or stress or frustration about something going on in my life or in the life of someone I love, I have to ask myself: am I trusting in God? Am I behaving in a way that shows my belief in God in heaven and on earth, the God who is almighty, omnipotent, and working in love and power and grace in the world?

When I am pursuing behaviors or activities that I know are not in God's best interests for me, ones that may be unhealthy physically or emotionally or spiritually, I have to ask myself: am I acknowledging that the omniscient God is present with me? Am I taking to heart the knowledge that I am God's, completely?

When I check the news headlines with trepidation and anxiety, concerned about the turmoil and hunger and hatred around

the world, I have to ask myself: am I aware that God is the only God there is? Do I really trust this omnipresent God?

When I grieve over the serious illness of someone I love dearly or deal with their death, I have to ask myself: do I believe in my heart of hearts that the all-loving God is here with me, that the person who died is with God forever, and that, yes, God is in control?

Life is filled with falsehood and doubt. When you get down to it, how many people can you really, truly count on, no matter what? How many truths do you really know beyond all uncertainty?

There is one truth on which you can stand, a truth you would do well to accept fully. No matter where you are in life or what you're dealing with, this is the truth that should permeate your experience: *"The Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other."*

This is where you start.

This is what you trust, what you stake your life on.

This is the substance of your faith.

This is what you know as unshakable, unyielding, absolute reality in a world seemingly devoid of absolutes: the God you

know, the God who knows you, is the God who lovingly rules the universe. It's this God, or nothing.

Take that to heart right now.



*God, I believe in you. I trust you. I rest in you. At least I say I do. Help me to really mean it. And know it. And take it to heart. Amen.*

#### 4. *Pay Attention*

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. —DEUTERONOMY 6:4-5



This familiar invitation of God through Moses is a special verse for Jewish people, who call it the *Shema* for the Hebrew word for hear. Many repeat it daily to remind them of the heart and soul of their faith.

“Hear, O Israel”—*listen carefully*. The Hebrew word for hear coaxes us to pay attention, to listen diligently. It’s not like hearing music playing in the background. It’s an intentional, focused listening with everything we have and are, every fiber of our being, to the voice of God.

We hear in this way because this God matters. This God is “the Lord alone.” This God is our God. This is the God we trust.

I usually regard as extremely suspect accounts of people who say they hear the voice of God speaking directly to them. But I vividly remember a time many years ago when I heard God

speak to me. It wasn't an audible voice, but I clearly heard the words spoken in love to my distressed mind.

At the time, I was upset about the downward trend of a close friendship. My friend and I had spent lots of time together in church and at play—praying together, hiking together, eating lunch together, just being together. But we had entered a serious rough spot in our friendship as other relationships and responsibilities claimed more and more of his time. I was becoming too dependent, and he was reacting to my neediness, perhaps unconsciously, by putting even more distance between us.

As the relationship deteriorated, my fears increased. I worried I would lose this meaningful friendship completely because of the choices he had made—and I was blind to the choices I'd made. My anxiety grew over the very real possibility that the rich relationship we had enjoyed for several years was coming to an end, perhaps forever. And this fear caused me to become increasingly needy with him, with the result that I wasn't much fun to be around, so he only avoided me more—which further fed my fear.

It was a frustrating cycle of pain, and it consumed far too much of my attention and energy.

One morning, in self-absorbed misery, I cried out to God, begging for a change in my friend's attitude so we could go back to the way things were. After all, wasn't I a terrific person?

Why didn't my friend appreciate me as he should? I was in a total wad of self-centered, clueless despair.

That I could hear God in the midst of that self-pity is a miracle in itself. But the words came with crystal clarity into my mind, like clean, fresh rainfall on dry, parched earth: *Let go of the fear, and the love will remain.*

When I heard those words, I nearly jumped out of my easy chair with the recognition that God was speaking to me, reassuring me, instructing me lovingly and giving me hope. It seemed clear to me: if only I could be bold enough to let go of my fear in the relationship, I would discover that our love and friendship would remain.

I could feel myself relax. And trust. My anxiety dissolved into peace.

Over time, I sensed a new balance in this friendship. I began to apply this principle of fearless trust to other relationships in my life.

Perhaps ironically, my friend and his wife and new family moved away a year or so later. I'm rather surprised to admit that these days we only connect once a year or so.

As I look back, I realize the words I heard may not have been meant only for that relationship but for all my life. My relationships fell back into balance over time, and I dealt with some vitally important issues of my life with trusted mentors

and counselors. Today, I am more content and fulfilled than ever.

*Let go of the fear, and the love will remain.* That reality has emboldened me to live more fully, to risk loving, to work diligently at being who I truly am as God made me.

Is God trying to tell you something in the midst of your fear or doubt or sadness? Listen. What you hear could change your life.

And the first thing we hear from God through Moses in this passage is a reminder to keep first things first: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

Love God wholly, with everything we are. When we hear and obey this command, when we learn to lean on God with everything we have within us, when we pay attention and accept this invitation to a full-bodied, full-spirited, full-hearted, full-minded love of our God, there’s no telling what we will be able to hear God saying to us.

Pay attention.



*God, open my ears and my heart to the whisper of your Spirit.  
Help me to pay attention to the way you work in my life. Help  
me to love you with all I have. Because you are the one and only.  
Amen.*



# God Beckons You to Responsibility

## *5. A Living Responsibility*

Have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth. —GENESIS 1:28B



God invites you to take full responsibility for all the other life on this planet—for “every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

Think of the ramifications. If you took responsibility for God’s full panoply of creation, what would that look like?

Would you take a greater interest in the environment? Would you be involved in the policies of your government and various corporations regarding preserving it and cleaning it up?

Would you be concerned about the treatment of animals raised to satisfy your physical needs? Or about the survival of species threatened by human invasion?

Would you take more opportunities to enjoy the great outdoors responsibly? To see it, experience, and spend time surrounded by natural beauty?

Seriously, what would you do if you took this invitation to heart?

As a young man (and perhaps again one of these days) one of my most favorite activities was camping. When my kids were young, I would try to get them into the outdoors at least once or twice a year to experience nature and enjoy the rhythms of life outdoors. Or, I would go camping with friends for a little camaraderie. It always felt good and restorative and holy to spend time outside.

In recent years my spouse, Dan, and I enjoyed a beat-up little cabin outside of Cashiers, North Carolina, on Lake Glenville. We bought it when it was in the midst of a much-needed renovation—which had not gotten very far. Slowly, over ten years, much work was done, though much remained. Even so, nothing in the world compared to sitting on that rickety porch and gazing out at the trees and the mountains and a little slice of Lake Glenville.

Experiencing the seasons there was a joy—from lush summer greenery to the wildy colorful spectacle of autumn, then from

the tracteries of the empty tree limbs and branches opening new unseen vistas to the fresh green rising in spring. The mountain laurel and rhododendrons and day lilies and blazing dahlias added fragrance and color as they danced in the breeze.

During rejuvenating but too-rare weekends, we spent wonderful moments together walking around the lake neighborhoods and horse meadow, staring at the crystal stars, driving country roads and gasping at the verdant vistas before us, or simply sitting and gazing at the peaceful lake from that rickety porch.

Alas, we finally sold our little cabin. But I learned again that being outside in God's creation invigorates the senses and helps us reset our overly digitized souls. It enables us to be in touch with the Creator, so we can appreciate not only the creation but also the One who so skillfully put it together for our use and enjoyment.

But as much as God delights in our enjoyment of nature, we need to remind ourselves that we do not own this planet, our island home. It belongs to its Creator. We are simply caretakers, tenants, stewards who are responsible for its upkeep. Yes, *responsible*.

Life on this planet is beautiful and rich and teeming. God beckons to you, welcoming you into this wondrous world, urging you to experience it. Enjoy it—and take responsibility to care for it.



*God, thank you for the gift of this planet. Help me accept my share of the responsibility for caring for it. As I enjoy the riches of creation, keep me mindful of the need to keep it clean and healthy and thriving. Amen.*

## *6. Following the Crowd*

You shall not follow a majority in wrongdoing;  
when you bear witness in a lawsuit, you shall  
not side with the majority so as to pervert  
justice. —EXODUS 23:2



God invites us to take responsibility. To stand up for what's right, even if we're standing there all alone.

This means not necessarily going along with the crowd or saying or doing things for the approval of those around you.

You may think peer pressure is something only young people face. But ask yourself whether you have ever done something because your friends or coworkers were doing it—even though you felt uncomfortable about it? If you're like me, the answer is yes. We want to be liked or feel like part of the gang. Maybe we are still seeking the approval of a parent (even one who is no longer alive).

Why is it so hard to do what's right in a world where it seems anything goes?

It all boils down to acceptance. We want to be accepted and loved and appreciated and enjoyed by those around us. And we will do whatever it takes to ensure they do.

So, when others get caught up in mischief—or worse—we go right along. We do or say what we think everyone else wants us to do or say, just so they'll continue to approve of us. And before we realize it, we've crossed a line, hurting ourselves or others as the result of our selfish fears.

God's word to us through Moses is simple: Don't follow the crowd in doing something harmful or hurtful. It's certainly a ready piece of advice parents give their children over the years—and advice children often ignore or reject. And to be honest: so did we when we were young—and probably still do from time to time.

An “everybody does it” attitude infects all of us. When we drive, we ignore speed limits or stop signs. When we do our taxes, we embellish our deductions. When we have a free evening, we go out with the gang instead of spending some much needed time with a neglected spouse or children. When we write our resumes and complete job applications, we make sure we look as good as possible—or even better.

What's the harm? Everybody does it.

But God beckons us to responsibility, to moral strength.

God urges us to build righteous boundaries, knowing how far we should go to protect ourselves and others.

God promises us the spiritual strength to stand strong in the face of temptation and to keep firm to those boundaries of behavior. If we adopt an “everybody does it” attitude with the little things, what’s to keep it from infecting us at deeper levels?

Standing up for what’s right may not please some people, but perhaps we shouldn’t be trying to please them anyway. Yet displaying moral responsibility will please God, whose acceptance of us is really all that matters.

I may be coming across as a goody-two-shoes here. But I hope you will like me anyway.



*God, give me the courage to take responsibility and do what’s right. Give me strength to make choices that honor you and your will for me, no matter what anyone else does or what others may think of me. I am so grateful that I don’t have to do anything to prove you love me because I know you accept me as I am. Amen.*

## 7. *Judging Justly*

You shall not render an unjust judgment;  
you shall not be partial to the poor or defer  
to the great: with justice you shall judge your  
neighbor. —LEVITICUS 19:15



Not long ago, I ran into an acquaintance who was stewing in self-righteous anger. His college-age son had been caught on campus doing something he wasn't supposed to be doing—"harmless frat fun," the father explained—and was hauled before the student judicial board.

The college, of course, had distributed to every student a rather thorough and explicit handbook, a detailed code of conduct with carefully worded consequences for specific infractions. And when that code was violated, the appropriate punishment was meted out, much to the chagrin of the student—and his father.

My acquaintance—an alumnus of the same college who had become rather successful in the business world—never came out and specifically said the words, "Don't they know who I am?" But I know that was exactly the question reverberating in his head. It was spilling out all over the place, in fact. You

could almost see him figuring up in his mind exactly how much his next alumni contribution to the school would not be.

But the board of student judges was simply following the clear rules, doing what was right and fair, regardless of the identity (or legacy) of the perpetrator.

Unfortunately, judicial proceedings are not always so just. Occasionally, the poor are given a pass because they're disadvantaged, but more often, they are treated even more harshly...because they're disadvantaged. The same is true with the rich: they sometimes seem to get away with murder, though occasionally, judges will make a harsh example of them.

God encourages us through Moses not to pervert justice but to be responsible to do what's right—no matter who is involved. That sounds so simple, but it can be difficult to fulfill.

From cover to cover, the Bible is clear that the poor and needy are always close to God's heart. But that's no reason to ignore their wrongdoing or excuse sin. A law broken by a poor person is still a broken law. But perhaps we ought to dig deeper into the causes *behind* the broken law. What drove the perpetrator to this point? What can be done to improve the situation?

On the other hand, just because someone is wealthy, powerful, or important should not mean they have a perpetual “get

out of jail free” pass. They too are responsible for their own actions. Just look at business news reports, and you’ll likely see one prominent person after another, in business, politics, sports, or entertainment, being hauled before a judge or otherwise in serious trouble.

The point is, no matter who commits wrong, it’s still wrong. Economic or corporate or political status should have no influence on the process of justice. And while we may not be involved in the legal system, we are still judges of our fellow humans. We encounter and pass judgment on numerous folks every day.

When someone cuts us off in traffic, we try, sentence, and condemn them in a flash. When someone rushes to the last open seat on the train before we do, we curse them silently—whatever happened to chivalry? When someone gets caught embezzling from their company or cheating on their spouse, we shake our heads with a superior air.

All those actions may be wrong. But we also must ask ourselves about whether we judge more harshly if the person is of a different race. What if the person is covered with tattoos and piercings, driving a car that costs ten times what you paid for yours, wearing a turban or hijab, or donning a particular political candidate’s cap?

Is your self-righteous reaction just a bit more superior?

The justice of God, the justice God seeks, is pure and righteous and perfect. Don't show favoritism in either direction, rich or poor. Take responsibility to do what is right. Judge justly.

You do that by looking at each person as a person, each act as an act. And you can do that only in God's wisdom and strength.



*God, it's so easy to judge people based on externals. But you look upon the heart. Give me a heart of compassionate justice, one that reflects your righteousness. And help me not to judge others but to leave that in your capable hands. Amen.*

## 8. *Strangers and Aliens*

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. —LEVITICUS 19:33-34



Wilfred was the first Black man I can remember relating to or, to be honest, even knowing. He was tall, slim, with skin the shade of a moonless, dusty midnight sky and blazing white teeth. I had trouble understanding him; his accent, though musical, was thick and strange to my four-year-old ears. One of his arms was malformed or had been injured. But he smiled a lot. He seemed to be a merry man.

Wilfred was an exchange student studying medicine at the university in the city where my father was a pastor at the time. For a year or so in the late 1950s, Wilfred lived in the garage apartment behind my family's parsonage on Grand Avenue in Morgantown, West Virginia.

I can still see clearly the shiny new Ford Edsel my father parked in front of the two-story garage. I peddled my black

and white metal police car around and around it—the driveway was pretty much the only level surface on our steeply inclined block. After his classes, Wilfred would come home and greet me warmly as he walked up the wooden staircase to his humble apartment. In my memory, he is always wearing a dark suit and a thin necktie over a bright white dress shirt.

My folks would invite him to join us for supper on occasion, especially on Sundays, and as we broke bread together, he would tell our family amazing stories about growing up in Liberia, a land that seemed strange and distant to me. After completing medical school, he intended to return home and serve his people as a doctor.

Wilfred was certainly different from all the other people around me at the time. My very young mind could hardly understand how it must have felt for him to live as a Black man, a foreigner, an alien in 1950s America just at the brink of the Civil Rights movement and its often-violent conflicts with the status quo.

All I knew was that he was friendly. And he smiled a lot.

Looking back, I hope he felt the same about us.

North America has changed dramatically in the past six or seven decades. We have continued to experience an influx of immigrants from all over the world, not only Africa, but also Mexico and Central and South America, Asia, the Middle East, Europe. In Atlanta, areas of town that were formerly

home to white suburbanites have become a colorful and diverse mixture of Latino/Hispanic and Asian culture.

Sometimes, frankly, this makes me uncomfortable. It can feel like outsiders are encroaching on my turf.

Then I read this verse. And I think of what Wilfred must have experienced. And I open my ears and my heart to God's generous beckoning to take responsibility, to "love them as yourself."

After all, we're all strangers and aliens here. We're just passing through. And God deeply desires that we enjoy the journey with one another.



*God, help me to be responsible to see others, no matter who they are or where they're from, as brothers or sisters or siblings. Help me love them like one of my own. After all, that's who they are. Amen.*

## 9. Stand Up

The LORD said to Joshua, “Stand up! Why have you fallen upon your face?” —JOSHUA 7:10



Suddenly, everything was falling apart.

One sinful act by one person, Achan, threatened to undo all the progress Israel had made under Joshua in the land God was giving them. After Israel miraculously defeated Jericho, Achan pilfered some valuable contraband from the city—forbidden booty most likely related to idolatrous worship. And that sinful act led to the shattering consequence of utter defeat by the forces of Ai.

The Israelites had confidently spied out the land and the resulting plan of attack seemed sound. There was only one problem: it didn't work.

The soldiers of Ai swarmed against the Israelites and struck them down. And Israel experienced defeat for the first time in their seemingly unstoppable quest for the Promised Land.

Joshua was shocked and devastated by the setback. He fell face to the ground before the ark of the Lord, weeping desperately before God for hours. Here's how *The Message* puts it:

Oh, oh, oh...Master, GOD. Why did you insist on bringing this people across the Jordan? To make us victims of the Amorites? To wipe us out? Why didn't we just settle down on the east side of the Jordan? Oh, Master, what can I say after this, after Israel has been run off by its enemies? When the Canaanites and all the others living here get wind of this, they'll gang up on us and make short work of us—and then how will you keep up *your* reputation? (Joshua 7:7-9, *The Message*).

I can see myself right there, feeling devastated and abandoned like Joshua. And that's so typical, isn't it? One surprise attack, one single reversal, and we want to give up. We feel like throwing the whole bathtub out the window, baby, water, and all. We writhe in self-absorbed agony, questioning God.

How could God treat us so? What happened to all those loving promises? Doesn't God realize what this will mean to us? How could God be so foolish? Doesn't God understand how bad this makes us—and God!—look to the rest of the world?

God finally silenced Joshua's distress, saying, "Stand up." Stop whining and groveling. Be strong in the face of this setback. Take responsibility for what has happened. Know that God is with you, but there are some things you must deal with.

Israel had sinned. Yes, just one Israelite, Achan, had actually broken God's law. But they were one people, one family.

And the wrongful act of one infected all: “They’ve broken the covenant I commanded them; they’ve taken forbidden plunder—stolen and then covered up the theft, squirreling it away with their own stuff” (Joshua 7:11, *The Message*).

You see, a covenant works both ways. God’s promises are fulfilled in obedient hearts.

Thankfully, self-defeated lives can be made new again. God instructed Joshua: “So get started. Purify the people. Tell them: Get ready for tomorrow by purifying yourselves” (Joshua 7:13, *The Message*).

Certainly, not all setbacks in life are the consequence of bad choices or wrong actions. But those things have consequences. When you find yourself suffering over a loss or a setback caused by wrongdoing, when you find yourself questioning God’s sanity and doubting God’s loving promises as Joshua did, listen to the divine invitation to stand up. Take responsibility. Get clean if you need to. Make things right if necessary.

And then get back to it.



*God, help me to see your hand behind the circumstances of my life. If I need to deal with sin and separation from you, help me to do that. If I need to stand up and move on, then give me the strength to do that. Amen.*