



TODAY IN THE WORD™

A ministry of Moody Bible Institute

Enter In

DOORS AND GATES IN SCRIPTURE

MARCH 2020

Is Christianity Too Narrow?

From the President of Moody Bible Institute

“Christianity is narrow enough to lead to life,
but it is broad enough to lead to grace.”



When I was dating my wife, Dee, I took her to the small town in Spain where I grew up. I was excited to show her the caves I explored as a boy, crawling

through dark tunnels by flashlight to discover enormous caverns filled with stalactites and stalagmites. Because we were young and in love, Dee agreed to this adventure. As I led her through the mud in the ever-narrowing passage, I could hear her begin to panic. *What if we got stuck?* But, twenty feet later, we stepped into this spectacular cave. I said to her, “It’s narrow to get there. But, boy is it worth it!”

I thought about that story because Christianity is like that. Some people say, “It’s way too narrow.” And they are right. But you have to go through something very narrow to get to something extremely great. Living in today’s pluralistic culture, I’m sure you’ve heard people say, “I don’t believe in absolute truth. Each of us has to discover our own truth for ourselves.” Or: “All religions have a piece of truth, but none of them can claim *all* the truth.” We are pressured

to see all religious beliefs as equally valid. We are told that no single view can be completely right, and that if we hold this attitude, we are unreasonable.

But, according to Scripture, Christianity is radically narrow. Listen to Jesus’ words: “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many that enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow is the road that leads to life, and only a few people find it” (Matt. 7:13–14). Jesus is clear. There is only one God and one way to God. There is no other way but through Jesus. In John 14:6, Jesus says, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Here, Jesus instructs us that there are no multiple ways to be right with God. There is no Plan B. There is no other option.

To embrace any other way to God is to deny the salvation of Jesus Christ. If there were multiple ways, Jesus would never have come. He would not have needed to die on the Cross. Friend, Christianity is narrow enough to lead to life, but it is broad enough to lead to grace. God’s truth is indeed narrow, but His boundless, incomprehensible love assures us that grace is wide. ■

Exclusively Inclusive

by Dr. John Koessler

“By making Jesus the only door through which we can find salvation, God opened the way to include everyone who comes in faith.”

In this pluralistic and inclusive age, it is popular to think that many diverse roads can lead to God. With so many belief systems, how can just one be correct? Those who assert this opinion consider the church’s claim that Jesus alone is the gate of salvation an example of cultural arrogance. How can we as Christ’s followers respond to this criticism? First, it is important for us to realize that this claim did not originate with the church. This claim of exclusivity traces to Jesus Himself, who declared, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

Second, the gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is offered not just to a select few, but to all. Jesus is the gate and the door, but He also extends this gift of salvation broadly as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). 1 John 2:2 says, “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” Jesus assured us that whoever comes to Him

will not be turned away (John 6:37).

By making Jesus the only door through which we can find salvation, God opened the way to include everyone who comes in faith. Jesus is to salvation what Adam was to sin. Paul explains this relationship in these words: “Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people” (Rom. 5:18). Christ came as our representative and as our substitute.

You might say that the salvation that Jesus offers is exclusively inclusive. The promise of forgiveness can be considered *exclusive* because it comes only through Christ. But, it is also *inclusive* because the invitation to receive this gift is offered to all: “For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:19). By making righteousness contingent on the One, God opened the way of salvation to many. ■

For Further Study

To learn more, read *Only One Way: Christian Witness in an Age of Inclusion* edited by Michael L. Johnson and Richard D. Phillips (P&R Publishing).

Go Deeper

We hope these questions will help you consider (or discuss with others) what God is teaching you through this month's study of His Word. We've left a bit of room to write down your thoughts as well!

WEEK 1: What do you do when sin is crouching at your door (see March 17)? How might you help other believers in the same situation?

WEEK 2: What Bible verse(s) do you have posted or hanging in your home? How are you living up to them? In what ways might you do better?

WEEK 3: How might you explain to someone, with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15), that Jesus is the *only* way to God?

WEEK 4: Doors in Scripture are sometimes connected with hospitality. What is biblical hospitality? How can you grow in this practice?

TODAY IN THE WORD™

Enter In

*Lift up your heads, you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.—Psalm 24:7*

“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me” (Rev. 3:20). What a powerful picture! Christ stands at the heart’s door of every believer. Our Savior desires a closer, deeper relationship with His people; He wants to dwell with us.

This image of the door of our heart is one of many mentions of doors and gates in Scripture—our study in this month’s *Today in the Word*. We pray that as we explore this topic—from Jacob’s dream and the gate to Heaven in Genesis all the way to the image of the New Jerusalem’s gates in Revelation—you’ll grow in your relationship with Christ and better understand:

- The significance of doors and gates in Scripture
- How to connect these images with the truth of salvation in Christ
- Our need to hear Christ’s voice and follow Him as the only “gate for the sheep” (John 10:7)
- God’s invitation to deeper fellowship with Him (Rev. 3:20)

Thank you for your support of the ministry of *Today in the Word*! Your partnership is vital as we bring the Word of God to thousands of people around the world, helping them open their hearts and lives to “the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). ■

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Gates and Doors

Read Psalm 24

Be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. — Psalm 24:7

If you close your eyes, can you picture the door of your childhood home? Maybe you remember unlatching the gate that led to your backyard? If you returned to these same places today, you might pause—before you walked through—to remember the past.

In the ancient near East, a triumphant king or leader entering a walled city or temple would pause and perform what scholars have labeled a “gate liturgy.” The ritual marked the importance of the victory and offered thanks to their god.

In today’s reading, David pauses at the gate to honor and thank God! His words honor the arrival of the Ark in Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6). This was an extraordinary occasion marked by sacrifices, music, dancing, feasting, and worship. In this beautiful Psalm, David declares that the Lord rules over all creation (vv. 1–2). He alone is worthy to be worshiped!

What are the qualifications for worthy worshipers (vv. 3–4)? They must be righteous inside and out, with clean

hands (can be seen) and a pure heart (cannot be seen).

The leader of the procession calls dramatically for the city gates to open and receive the Ark, symbolizing the presence of God (vv. 7–10). The expression “Lift up your heads, you gates” implies welcome and submission. The authority of the “King of glory” is being recognized and celebrated!

This month we will look at the doors and gates in Scripture. We will examine the doors and gates in Israel’s history; then, we will consider Christ’s redemption, ending at the gates of the New Jerusalem. By examining these important mentions of gates and doors, we will better understand God’s faithfulness and mercy.

▶ As we enter this new study, let’s pause at the gate to honor God, celebrating who He is in our lives, and why He alone is worthy of praise. Open the “door” of your heart for the King of glory and allow Him to enter!

Pray with Us

Thank you for joining us in our Bible and prayer journey with *Today in the Word* this month. Our prayer today is that the Lord will show us what we need to learn to have a closer walk with Him, hear His voice, and enjoy His presence.

Protection and Security

Read Judges 16:1–21

He breaks down gates of bronze and cuts through bars of iron.—Psalm 107:16

When I was a child, my father installed a deadbolt on the front door of our home. Since at the time it was the safest lock we knew, we felt very well-protected! Times have changed, though, and nowadays many homeowners set up high-tech security systems, complete with video cameras and motion sensors.

In biblical times, the city gate played a significant role in protecting and defending against enemies. To keep a hostile army out of a walled city, they simply shut and barred the gate. God’s loving strength exercised in “wonderful deeds” on behalf of His people is pictured using this same image of a city gate in Psalm 107: “He breaks down gates of bronze and cuts through bars of iron” (vv. 15–16). That’s what makes Samson’s feat in today’s reading so amazing. Samson singlehandedly tore loose the doors and posts of the city gate of Gaza and walked off with them (v. 3)! Not only did they likely weigh a total of 400-500 pounds, they were also firmly anchored

and reinforced. While the Philistines had planned to trap and ambush Samson in Gaza, they never stood a chance. All by himself, he wrecked the city’s main defense.

The Lord had blessed Samson with incredible physical strength, but he weakened himself by toying with sin and temptation. Maybe that is why he thought he could get away with sin. He taunted Delilah and failed to take warning from her betrayals. Eventually, his moral strength failed and he disobeyed God by telling his secret (v. 16), disrespecting his Nazirite vow and God’s special gift of strength (v. 20). Samson’s physical strength contrasted starkly and tragically with his moral and spiritual weakness.

► Do you consider yourself strong: physically or spiritually? Samson’s story reminds us that we should never confuse God’s strength with our own. Don’t mess with sin! Samson acted as if he were in control and invincible, instead of trusting and relying on the Lord (Prov. 3:5–6).

Pray with Us

Today’s devotional prompts us to rely on God’s strength, rather than on our own. Let’s praise our all-powerful God that His strength overcomes all obstacles and, as today’s key verse says, “cuts through bars of iron.”

Gates and the Sabbath

Read Jeremiah 17:19–27

*Keep the Sabbath day holy,
as I commanded your ancestors. —Jeremiah 17:22*

If you're familiar with the story of Ruth, you might remember how Boaz "asked permission" to marry her (Ruth 4:1–12). Boaz was legally required to negotiate with a relative who had a prior claim on the widow and her land. When that man gave up his right, Boaz was free to marry Ruth. Where this agreement took place, the city gate, lends important insight to today's reading.

Jeremiah once again mentions the city gate. In biblical times, not only were these gates necessary for protection, but they were a place to conduct business. Boaz knew the elders of the town would be present to serve as witnesses.

The prophet Jeremiah delivered a message from the Lord at the Gate of the People and other gates (vv. 19–20). Why? He knew that many people would be present at this location to hear him. He also knew it would be a good visual aid. By bringing loads of goods through the city gates on the Sabbath, the people were breaking God's commands to keep the Sabbath

day holy (vv. 21–23). This was happening in view of all!

Honoring the Sabbath is the fourth of the Ten Commandments, where it is linked back to creation (Ex. 20:8–11). Keeping it was a matter of holiness. This was important! Jeremiah also put the choice and its consequences in terms of the city gates: If they obeyed the Lord and stopped bringing loads through the gates, then kings in the Davidic line would continue to come in through those same gates and the nation would prosper (vv. 24–26). If they continued to disobey, God would bring judgment on Jerusalem in the form of foreign conquerors who would burn her gates (v. 27).

► Like all God's commands, the Sabbath is a gift intended for our good. Rest and renewal are built into God's design for His creation (Gen. 2:2–3). How can you honor God's gift of the Sabbath and put into practice His desire for you to rest?

Pray with Us

Lord, thank you for the gift of rest! We pray for wisdom to know what true rest is, to appreciate your Sabbath, and to enter into your rest through the gates of thanksgiving and praise.

A Gate Called Beautiful

Read Acts 3

By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong.—Acts 3:16

Robotic suits can help disabled individuals walk again! Experimental bionic limbs or “wearable robots” are currently used only in rehabilitation and physical therapy settings, but as materials get lighter, computers get smarter, and batteries last longer, designers hope this technology will allow use in everyday life.

Peter didn’t need robotics to help a lame man walk. He healed the man with a word by the power of Christ (vv. 6–7). By sitting at the temple’s Beautiful Gate (v. 2), also called the Nicanor Gate, the crippled beggar could be sure of attention from crowds of people who might be in a mood to give him money. Peter, however, gave him something better. The healed man responded by “walking and jumping, and praising God,” thereby demonstrating joyful faith (v. 8).

Because of the Beautiful Gate setting and the fact that many locals knew the healed man (vv. 9–10), Peter’s miracle attracted immediate attention. Faithful Jews would have

been reminded of the prophecy of Isaiah 35:6: “Then will the lame leap like a deer.” A large crowd gathered, and Peter was able to preach an evangelistic sermon, just as he had at Pentecost (see Acts 2).

Peter’s message was not an ear-tickling one about how Jesus meets our needs. He accused the people of killing the Son of God, who had nonetheless risen from the dead (vv. 13–15). He gave God the glory for the miraculous healing they’d all just witnessed (v. 16), summarized God’s plan of redemption (vv. 18, 24–26), and issued a call to repent and turn to Messiah Jesus (vv. 19–23). Many responded with faith in Christ, although the attitudes of the Jewish leaders continued to be hostile (see Acts 4:1–3).

► What social gathering places today are the equivalent of the biblical city gates? Shopping malls? Social media? How can we bring God’s words and power into these places for His glory and the expansion of His kingdom?

Pray with Us

Today is the Moody Bible Institute Day of Prayer. With today’s focus on worship and prayer, please continue to uphold Moody’s mission and vision, as well as our donors and staff. Thank you for your faithful support of Moody’s ministries!

The Gate of Heaven

Read Genesis 28:10–22

*This is none other than the house of God;
this is the gate of heaven. — Genesis 28:17*

Have you ever passed an antique wardrobe and wondered if there might be a wintry world on the other side? In C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, a wardrobe provides a gateway to Narnia. Lewis seemed fond of these passageways to another time and place. In *Prince Caspian*, Aslan creates a "door in the air" and in *The Last Battle*, the characters pass through a stable door into a new world as the old Narnia ends.

Imagine Jacob's surprise when he was presented with a similar amazing door! One could hardly imagine a less likely time for Jacob to be given a vision of heaven. He was running away from a messed-up family situation, including an angry brother and an offended father. That night, he saw in a dream a "stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (v. 12). What was it? Probably a stairway on the side of a ziggurat, a pyramid-like building that would have been culturally familiar

as a kind of temple. The angels were going up and down, going about their Lord's business.

In the dream, God renewed His covenant with Jacob (vv. 13–15). Why now? Jacob was at a low point and needed encouragement. He was leaving the Promised Land and received assurance that he would return. God chose this moment to remind Jacob that the covenant was not about his own merit or worthiness, but about God's faithful love and glory.

Jacob responded: "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven" (v. 17). He set up a memorial stone and named the place Bethel, or the "house of God" (vv. 18–19).

► Perhaps, like Jacob, you're struggling today, maybe from a dysfunctional family situation. How can God work in our lives when people make such a wreck of things? Fear not! Jesus Himself is the "stairway to heaven," bringing the life and truth of heaven to earth (John 1:51).

Pray with Us

Jacob's example in today's devotional teaches us about God's faithful love and His glory that overcome all obstacles. Our prayer is that we will remember that God's faithfulness depends on His nature and promises, and not on our own merit.

Gates of Death

Read Psalm 9:1–14

Have mercy and lift me up from the gates of death. — Psalm 9:13

The Bible’s gates of hell or “gates of death” (v. 13) may remind *Lord of the Rings* fans of the Black Gate of Mordor. In J.R.R. Tolkien’s books and the movie adaptations, the Black Gate is a fearsome structure—dark, huge, seemingly invulnerable, and guarded by legions of powerful, evil creatures. Merely to approach this gate was to be tempted to despair.

Psalm 9 contrasts the “gates of death” (v. 13) with the “gates of Zion” (v. 14). First, it announces itself as a song of praise and thanksgiving (vv. 1–2). Then the telling “of all your wonderful deeds” opens by describing what God had done to Israel’s enemies (vv. 3–6). He’d rebuked and sent ruin upon them, while upholding and vindicating His people. The praise continues by describing God’s overall worthiness to be worshiped (vv. 7–12). The Lord is on His throne, ruling sovereignly over all nations. He is just and righteous. For the oppressed, He is a refuge and stronghold. He is eternally constant: “You, LORD, have never

forsaken those who seek you” (v. 10). We “who know your name” should be proclaiming to the world His love and faithfulness (v. 10).

The two gates appear in the next two verses, where David prayed for God to act with mercy and power, as He had in the past (vv. 13–14). The situation was dire. He felt as though he was at the very “gates of death.” But if God would have mercy and rescue him, he would remain able to sing God’s praises “in the gates of Daughter Zion,” that is, Jerusalem, “and there rejoice in your salvation.” This represents a complete reversal. To be transported from the “gates of death” to the “gates of Zion” is an impossible miracle, something only God could do!

► Are you feeling closer to the “gates of death” or to the “gates of Zion” today? No matter how you may feel, remember God is present with you and delights to hear your prayers. As this psalm shows, praise, thanksgiving, and cries for help can all be expressed together!

Pray with Us

As today’s reading from Psalm 9 shows, we can express a gamut of emotions when we come to God, even a desperate cry for help. What do you need to express to the Lord in prayer today: praise, thanksgiving, fear, despair? He hears you!

The Doors of Solomon's Temple

Read 1 Kings 6:11–38

Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and joy are in his dwelling place. — 1 Chronicles 16:27

Renaissance sculptor Lorenzo Ghiberti designed special bronze doors for a cathedral in Florence, Italy. Called the “Gates of Paradise,” they stand 17 feet high and weigh 4.5 tons. Artistically, they feature ten richly detailed panels depicting stories from the Old Testament, including Moses receiving the Law and the Israelites’ conquest of Jericho. It took Ghiberti and his workers 27 years to create these amazing doors!

No doubt the doors of Solomon’s temple were equally impressive. After all, Solomon was king during the golden age of Israel. God had promised his father David that his son would build a magnificent temple for the Lord. David had gathered the very best construction and artistic materials, including cedar and gold, for him to work with. The designs of the tabernacle and the temple were essentially the same, with the Most Holy Place at the center. Like the tabernacle, the temple was the national worship center and symbolized God’s

presence. The building project, which took seven years in all (v. 38), was the perfect occasion for God to renew His covenant (vv. 11–13).

The doors of the temple are described in verses 31–35. The door to the inner sanctuary was made of olive wood and decorated with cherubim, flowers, and palm trees, overlaid with gold leaf. These may have been folding doors, similar to the ones Ezekiel saw in his vision (Ezek. 41:23–25). The door to the main hall was made of juniper and decorated with gold-covered carvings, intended to suggest paradise or the Garden of Eden. Why? As the *NIV Study Bible* explains: “In a symbolic sense, readmission to the paradise of God is now to be had only by means of atonement for sin at the sanctuary.”

► Since a picture is worth a thousand words, why not look up a drawing of Solomon’s temple? Using biblical descriptions, illustrators have been able to accurately depict its grandeur.

Pray with Us

Moody undergraduate students will travel across the country and world as their spring break begins today. Some are serving in ministry, while others rest at home, spending time with family. Our students will be grateful for your prayers.

Gatekeepers of the Temple

Read 1 Chronicles 9:17–29

Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people. — Ephesians 6:7

Do modern churches have gatekeepers? Yes, but unfortunately the reason has changed. As reported in *Christianity Today*, “Armed security at churches is becoming a new norm.” Why? “An estimated 617 worshipers have been killed in violent incidents in the U.S. since 1999, and the number of attacks at houses of worship has risen almost every year.”

The 212 gatekeepers of Solomon’s temple filled important “positions of trust” (v. 22). They were drawn from among the Levites, with rotating shifts that manned guard stations on all four sides of the temple (1 Chron. 26:12–18). Phinehas, son of Eleazar, had been in charge of the tabernacle gatekeepers, so this group had a heritage of zeal for God’s name (v. 20). In Numbers 25, Phinehas took action against a brazen example of sexual immorality and idolatry and thereby turned God’s anger away from Israel.

What were the gatekeepers’ responsibilities? These varied at different times in history, but their

main duty was to guard the gates of the tabernacle or temple (v. 23). This wasn’t because God needed protection, but to prevent people from intentionally or unintentionally doing disrespectful or blasphemous things in God’s house. They had charge of the keys (v. 27), kept watch over the treasuries (v. 26), and served as stewards of the various articles and supplies needed for worship (vv. 28–29).

Gatekeeper functions recorded elsewhere in Scripture include preventing ceremonially unclean people from entering (2 Chron. 23:19) and collecting and distributing freewill offerings (2 Chron. 31:4; 34:9). They assisted in Josiah’s revival specifically by removing pagan idols from the temple (2 Kings 23:4). They were individuals who served behind the scenes with excellence!

► Ushers or greeters serve as one kind of “gatekeeper” in our churches today. Today, thank one or more ushers for their service to your congregation.

Pray with Us

Will you encourage in prayer Moody’s graduate students whose spring break also begins this week? It’s a privilege to provide a Moody education for today’s Christian leaders, and we appreciate your prayer support for Moody Theological Seminary.

One Day in Your Courts

Read Psalm 84

*Better is one day in your courts
than a thousand elsewhere. —Psalm 84:10*

“Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere.” You may recognize this chorus from the popular worship song written by Matt Redman, but these lyrics actually originated in the Psalms. The sentiment is just as true today. Both then and now, our hearts can only be fully satisfied when we are in God’s presence.

The psalmist expresses a longing for God’s presence, which is compared here to the temple in Jerusalem (vv. 1–4). This longing is all-encompassing: “My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God” (v. 2). This longing motivates our journey: “Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage” (v. 5).

The “psalmist” here is actually plural—the “Sons of Korah,” a Levitical choir. The Sons of Korah were gatekeepers in the temple (see yesterday’s study). So they weren’t longing to *become* doorkeepers in the house of the Lord (v. 10). They already were! The original occasion for this psalm, however, might have been

when King Sennacherib of Assyria attacked and Hezekiah bought him off with all the silver and gold in the temple (2 Kings 18:13–16). In that case, the temple would have been unable to be used for worship. The background for the prayer of verses 8–9 might then show their desire for this problem to be resolved.

In any case, those of us who long for God and have our hearts set on pilgrimage are blessed (vv. 5–12). Faith does not depend on our external circumstances. Even if one is passing through the Valley of Baka, presumably a hard or dry place, faith can make it a place of refreshing springs (v. 6). The blessing of faith is God Himself—being in God’s presence is good because God Himself is good (v. 11).

► Do you long to experience God’s presence? Why not read or recite Psalm 84 aloud? Doing so would be an excellent way to begin and end your day. Let the beautiful truths in this psalm encourage your journey.

Pray with Us

Let’s join the psalmist’s prayer in today’s reading, asking for God’s presence, love, and mercy to be with us all the days of our lives. May the Lord show us afresh how to recognize and enjoy His presence.

Gates of Thanksgiving

Read Psalm 100

*Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth.
Worship the LORD with gladness. — Psalm 100:1*

At one time in church history, ordinary Christians didn't sing. Instead, they listened while sacred music was performed by professionals. But thanks to the Reformation and the invention of the printing press, congregational singing made a comeback. The first hymnal was printed in 1532. Simple, singable tunes and sturdy theological lyrics helped believers worship and learn about their faith at the same time.

Singing has long been a part of how we worship God. The first song recorded in Scripture is the one sung by Moses and Miriam after the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea (Ex. 15:1–21). Many refer to the Psalms as “the Bible’s hymnbook,” and Psalm 100 is an excellent example why.

This psalm opens with a call for “all the earth” to praise the Lord and to “come before him with joyful songs” (vv. 1–2). “Shout for joy” is elsewhere translated “Make a joyful noise,” a phrase beloved by those of us who cannot sing. Why should we praise the Lord? Because God is God

(v. 3). Furthermore, He has a special relationship with His people. He made us His own, and we belong to Him. “We are his people, the sheep of his pasture” (v. 3).

Therefore, we should “Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise” (v. 4). The previous verse pictured us as sheep and implied that God is our shepherd (see also Ps. 23; John 10:11–15), so it may be that the psalmist has a sheep-gate in mind here. But the main reference is likely the temple gates. It’s easy to picture this psalm being sung by a joy-filled procession of worshipers entering the temple! The blessing of worship is God Himself—being in God’s presence is good because God Himself is good, loving, and faithful (v. 5).

▶ If you love to study hymns or use them in your devotional time, you might enjoy the recently published anthology of classic hymns (plus notes), *40 Favorite Hymns on the Christian Life: A Closer Look at Their Spiritual and Poetic Meaning*, by Leland Ryken.

Pray with Us

Singing can be a way of praying! Psalm 100 instructs us to “come before [God] with joyful songs.” Even if you consider yourself a terrible singer, you can still sing to God in your heart, praising Him for His faithfulness.

Idolatry Behind the Gates

Read Ezekiel 8

You shall have no other gods before me.—Exodus 20:3

On October 31, 1517, now celebrated as Reformation Day, Martin Luther posted his “95 Theses” to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. In them, he attacked then-common practices and beliefs of the Catholic church, including requiring payment for forgiveness (called “indulgences”). He was determined that the truth of Scripture be upheld against corrupt human traditions.

Similarly, Ezekiel was given a mission by God to expose the sins of Israel. In Psalms 84 and 100, we’ve seen that praise and worship *should* happen at the temple. But in Ezekiel 8, God showed the prophet a vision of the idolatry that was actually happening. Specifically, God showed Ezekiel four pictures of spiritually detestable things happening in Jerusalem. First, He pointed out the “idol of jealousy” (vv. 5–6), called so because God is “jealous” in that He will not allow worship of any other gods (Ex. 20:3–6). This idol may have been Asherah or another Canaanite goddess. God

was so disgusted by this that He had abandoned His own temple.

Second, God had the prophet dig into a wall to reveal a hidden doorway (vv. 7–13). Inside were leaders worshiping “crawling things and unclean animals.” Third, Ezekiel saw women engaged in rites for Tammuz, a fertility god (vv. 14–15). Fourth, God showed him people worshiping the sun in the very place where priests should have been (v. 16). Idolatry had become pervasive. The people foolishly thought the Lord did not see these “private” actions (v. 12). “Putting the branch to their nose” was probably a gesture of derision, like thumbing their nose at God. This was covenant-breaking of the worst kind, and God was righteously angry (vv. 17–18).

► Do we hide our sins from the Lord? How ludicrous it is to try! As followers of Christ, we should confess our wrongdoings regularly and accept His forgiveness, in the process turning away from sin and toward righteousness (1 John 1:9).

Pray with Us

Having read the sobering words of the prophet Ezekiel, we come to God in prayer today, taking time to confess our sins and accept His forgiveness in Christ. We turn away from sin and the ways of the world, toward righteousness.

Shut the Temple Doors

Read Malachi 1:6–14

*My name will be great among the nations,
from where the sun rises to where it sets. —Malachi 1:11*

In years past, a student would show respect to a favorite teacher with the gift of an apple. But what if the apple was rotten or full of worms? Then what would traditionally have been a sign of respect and honor would become a sign of disrespect or even an insult.

That’s essentially what happened in today’s reading. In a series of questions-and-answers, God through the prophet Malachi condemned Israel for offering “defiled food” as sacrifices (vv. 6–9). Not even a human leader would accept the blind, lame, and diseased animals being brought as sacrifices, much less the Almighty God (see Deut. 15:21). These offerings showed the sinful state of the people’s hearts. Their worship had become phony. The priests were also to blame, since by accepting such offerings they showed contempt for the Lord.

Rather than continue with hypocrisy and evil, God said, it would be better to shut the doors of the temple and stop the fake worship (v. 10). He wanted to end

the insulting charade! The spirit of true worship was a stark contrast to their hypocrisy: “My name will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to me, because my name will be great among the nations,” says the LORD Almighty” (v. 11).

God’s faithful love for Israel contrasted with their spiritual unfaithfulness (see vv. 2–5). They regarded worship as burdensome, and even dared to say, “The Lord’s table [altar] is defiled” (v. 12). A day of reckoning was coming! Already we’re seeing basically two types of doors and gates. Through one we find a right relationship with God; the other leads to idolatry, sin, and God’s wrath.

► Do you give the Lord the very best, “firstfruits,” of your finances or only what is left at the end of the month? Do you view your offering of money or time as a burden? Ask God to forgive this attitude and help you become a cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:7).

Pray with Us

What a severe warning we receive from the book of Malachi! Is our tithing a charade that makes the Lord angry? May it never be! As we study today’s passage, chapter 1 of Malachi, ask God to make you generous and cheerful givers.

Lamenting at the Gates

Read Lamentations 2:1–11

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret. —2 Corinthians 7:10

Do you know what it means to lament? A central subject in the book of Lamentations, lament is an outpouring of grief before the Lord. In a recent article in *Themelios*, Robert S. Smith observed that the contemporary church is out of practice with this emotion. Why does this matter? Grieving over sin and its consequences should be part of our spiritual lives. As Smith explains, “The path to praise passes through lament.”

The Book of Lamentations shows us what it means to lament, as the prophet Jeremiah grieved over Judah’s conquest and exile. Doors and gates that should have been an entry point for worship had been opened to reveal idolatry and covenant unfaithfulness. As a result, the protective function of the city gates of Jerusalem had been overthrown (v. 9) and they’d been burned (Neh. 1:3). The conquest and exile were devastating especially because Jerusalem and the temple symbolized God’s presence with His people.

The first nine verses of today’s reading are a poetic picture of God’s judgment and righteous anger. This inexorable flood of negative verbs and images depicts Him as an enemy (v. 5). Ultimately, the conquest was His doing, not Babylon’s. He even destroyed His own temple: “The Lord has rejected his altar and abandoned his sanctuary” (v. 7).

The author, traditionally Jeremiah, was leading the people in repenting and lamenting their sins (vv. 10–11). Nowhere is God accused of being unjust. He’d graciously warned them many times through His prophets. Jeremiah called Israel to repent, because God was the only One who could righteously, justly, and lovingly do anything about their situation.

► Often the only verses in Lamentations we know are the ones about God’s mercies (3:22–23). To understand the bigger picture, we encourage you to read the entire book (just five chapters) at your earliest opportunity.

Pray with Us

Coming to the Lord in prayer today, we ask Him to give us insight into godly sorrow and lament, to increase our ability to grieve over sin, and to show unbelievers the way toward salvation through Christ’s sacrifice.

Rebuilding the Gates

Read Nehemiah 2

*He who was seated on the throne said,
“I am making everything new!”—Revelation 21:5*

Scaffolding now surrounds Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, which was set ablaze on April 15, 2019. Although there are many opinions on how to restore the 900-year-old iconic structure to its former grandeur, everyone agrees it will not be an easy task. One critic asked: “How can we build something in five years that has taken hundreds of years to be built?”

Nehemiah served as royal cupbearer in the court of King Artaxerxes of Persia. He told the king the story of his home city lying in ruins and his desire to help rebuild it (vv. 1–5). It was risky for him to even look sad in the king’s presence, and even riskier to ask for a favor, but God blessed him with the king’s approval.

Nehemiah had both prayed and prepared for this moment (vv. 6–9). He had a plan and specific requests ready to go, no doubt drawing on his palace insider’s knowledge of the workings of the imperial government. When he

arrived in Jerusalem, the situation was politically dangerous. Several local authorities were content with the status quo and didn’t want to see the city rebuilt (v. 10). Nehemiah kept his plans to himself and discreetly inspected the walls and gates to assess the size of the challenge facing him (vv. 11–16).

When he was ready, he shared his plan to rebuild with the Jewish leaders (vv. 17–20). The key was simple: “The God of heaven will give us success.” Though He had righteously judged the nation’s sin, He had not abandoned His people. Opposition and ridicule could be overcome. The gates that had been burned (v. 17) could be rebuilt, with His help, and dedicated again to His purposes (see Neh. 12:30).

► Do you have areas of your life that are damaged and in need of rebuilding? In our human strength, we may feel discouraged. But remember that the God you serve is over all things and in Him we are made new.

Pray with Us

The story of rebuilding in today’s reading gives us hope for the restoration of everything that has been destroyed in our lives. Lord, we lift up areas of our lives that need to be restored, and we rely on your promise to make everything new.

Questions & Answers

by Michael Rydelnik, Moody professor and host
of Moody Radio's *Open Line*

Q "Do I really believe this stuff?"
When I read the Bible, such thoughts often distract me. How do I fight off doubt? How do I make these terrible thoughts go away?

A You're not the first to struggle with doubt. Most followers of Jesus, even John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah, have dealt with doubt from time to time. Matthew's record of John's doubt (Matt. 11:2–19) gives helpful advice on how to deal with this issue.

To begin, we may experience doubt during difficult and discouraging circumstances. In this Scripture, John was in prison for having challenged the inappropriate marriage of Herod Antipas. This caused him to wonder if he had correctly identified Jesus as the promised Messiah. So, John sent his disciples to inquire of Jesus, "Are You the One who is to come, or should we expect someone else" (vv. 2–3)?

The Lord's response to John includes four ways we can deal with doubt. The first is to *remember the evidence*. Jesus reminds John that "the blind see, the lame walk . . . the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor are told the good news" (vv. 4–5). Together, these events fulfilled the predictions found in Isaiah 35:1–10 and 61:1–3 and were evidence that Jesus was the true Messiah. When we face

doubt, it is good to review the evidence that convinced us to believe in the first place.

Second, to deal with doubt, we need to *accept the Lord's approval*. Too often, when we doubt, we beat ourselves up and think God is fed up with us. Instead, the Lord Jesus affirms John as the greatest prophet up to that point (Matt. 11:7–11). Remarkably, the Lord says the same of us: "Among those born of women no one greater than John the Baptist has appeared, but the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (v. 11). The Lord knows our weakness and that we are but dust. He affirms even our smallest efforts to deal with our doubts.

Third, to overcome doubt, we need to *manage our expectations*. Too often, we expect life to be perfect once we trust in Jesus; we imagine that we will no longer face any struggles. Matthew 11:12, a verse that is notoriously difficult to translate, teaches just the opposite. Here's my personal translation: "From the days of John the Baptist, the kingdom of heaven is forcefully advancing and violent men are opposing it." The point is that both we and John need to correct our false expectations. The kingdom of God is progressing even when we are facing difficult circumstances. We should not be surprised when life isn't perfect now.

“When you feel discouraged, remember that doubt is common to all of us, but the words of Jesus teach us to overcome it.”

Finally, we need to *guard against dissatisfaction*. In verses 16–19, Jesus reminds the crowd that some were dissatisfied with John’s ministry while at the same time they were disgruntled with Jesus. It is dangerous when we’re never satisfied with answers to our doubts because that can transform doubt into disbelief. Wisdom learns to accept what can be understood and what cannot. When you feel discouraged, remember that doubt is common to all of us, but the words of Jesus teach us to overcome it.

Q **If Joseph was Jesus’ stepfather, why is Jesus’ genealogy traced from Joseph? If God is His Father, why does Jesus’ human genealogy matter?**

A In Luke’s narrative of the birth of Jesus, we are given Mary’s genealogy (Luke 3:23–38). Probably the best way to interpret verse 23 is like this: Jesus “was thought to be the son of Joseph, the *son-in-law* of Heli.” Then the genealogy continues all the way back to David, Abraham, and Adam. This establishes Mary as the physical descendant of David, so it can be stated that Jesus truly was “the Son of David” through the lineage of David’s son Nathan.

Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:1–16), from Joseph’s perspective,

is also important because it clearly demonstrates Jesus’ legal right to the throne of David. According to Judaism, Jesus, as the adopted son of Joseph, would have all the legal rights of a biological heir. Joseph descended from David through Solomon, and that was the chosen line of David for someone to be considered king. Hence, the Lord Jesus was the son of David by biological descent through Mary and the king of Israel by legal right through Joseph.

The amazing part of all this is that God had cursed the line of Solomon so that no *physical* descendant of his could be named king. Jeremiah 22:30 says of Coniah, “Record this man as childless . . . none of his descendants will succeed in sitting on the throne of David or ruling again in Judah.” This created a “Catch 22” of sorts. Only a descendant of Solomon could be king, yet this line was cursed. Therefore, only Jesus could fulfill the Davidic covenant. Jesus had the legal right to be king through Joseph but, because He was virgin born, the curse on Coniah did not apply to Him. Instead, He was the son of David through His mother Mary. Both genealogies are significant in establishing the Lord Jesus as the true Davidic King. ■

Rebuilding the Spiritual Gates

Read Nehemiah 8

*All the people listened attentively
to the Book of the Law.—Nehemiah 8:3*

World Book Day takes place on April 23. Organized by UNESCO, World Book Day is “a celebration to promote the enjoyment of books and reading.” According to their purpose statement, books provide “a link between the past and the future, a bridge between generations and across cultures.” The event occurs on the date several famous authors died, including William Shakespeare and Miguel Cervantes.

The power of reading played a key part in today’s passage. In addition to physically rebuilding the gates and walls of Jerusalem, there was an urgent need to rebuild the “spiritual gates and walls” of God’s people. That is, the returned exiles needed to return not only to the land but to the Lord Himself. They needed to confess their sins and rededicate themselves to covenant faith and obedience.

As God’s Word was read aloud to God’s people, gathered at the Water Gate in rebuilt Jerusalem (v. 1), that’s exactly what they did. For six hours, “daybreak till noon,” everyone who

was old enough to understand listened as Ezra the priest read the Pentateuch (vv. 2–3). Levites were scattered among the crowd, offering instruction and explanation to accompany the reading (vv. 7–8). The people responded to what they heard with respect and worship (vv. 5–6). As they listened, they wept over their sins. But Nehemiah told them that today was to be a day of celebration (vv. 9–12): “This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.” So the people went out and gathered branches to make booths for the Feast of Tabernacles (vv. 13–18; Lev. 23:33–43). This feast commemorated the Exodus and how God had chosen them and made them a holy nation (Ex. 19:6). It was the best such festival since the days of Joshua!

► Reading God’s Word is the key to revival! Do you spend time each day, reading and reflecting on Scripture? How encouraging to know that God wants us not only to read His Word but also to understand what it says (v. 8).

Pray with Us

Christians are called “the people of the Book.” May we honor and read the Word of God regularly, the way we see it done in today’s passage. Ask God to increase your love for His Word.

God's Glory Returns

Read Ezekiel 43:1–11

*His voice was like the roar of rushing waters,
and the land was radiant with his glory.—Ezekiel 43:2*

Have you ever seen the glory of the Lord? There are passages in the Old Testament that describe how incredible that experience must be. In Exodus at the completion of the tabernacle project, the Israelites hold a dedication ceremony. The author describes the magnificent event: “The glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (Ex. 40:34–35).

During the Jewish exile in Babylon, Ezekiel foretold that the glory of the Lord would one day return to the temple. In his world, the temple of Solomon had been demolished. But in his vision, a “man” (v. 1)—the description points to this person being the preincarnate Christ—showed him a vision of a new temple. That temple has yet to be built—this prophecy will be fulfilled during the Millennial Kingdom.

Today's reading is the climax of the vision. The Lord's glory, which had

earlier departed (Ezek. 11:23), now returned from the east and entered through the east gate (vv. 1–5). “The land was radiant with his glory” (v. 2). The Spirit took Ezekiel to the inner court but not inside the temple itself. No human being could enter or live in that situation. The return of God's glory meant the return of God's presence and blessing (vv. 6–9). He promised this would be permanent and at that future time the people would “never again defile my holy name” (v. 7). The present purpose of the vision was to make the Israelites “ashamed of their sins” (vv. 10–11; see also 2 Cor. 7:1). By describing God's faithfulness, glory, and plans, the idea was that their hearts would be struck anew with reverence for the Lord.

► God said He would “live among the Israelites forever” (v. 7). Jesus made us a similar promise: “I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). If you're feeling abandoned by God, pray back to the Lord these verses today.

Pray with Us

Lord Jesus, thank you for your promise, both in the Old and New Testaments, to be with your people: “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” (Heb.13:5). Thank you that we can rely on your promises because they are always true!

When Sin Crouches at Your Door

Read Genesis 4:1–16

Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it. — Genesis 4:7

We have quite a few expressions in the English language that involve doors. An opportunity is often called an “open door.” If “opportunity is knocking” at your door, a response is needed. If you encounter a small opportunity, you might only have your “foot in the door.” And if you face a “closed door,” you can still succeed by going through the “back door.”

The expression that is the title for today’s devotional comes from the story of Cain and Abel. Today we begin the second section of this month’s study. While we first looked at Israel’s history through sin and judgment back to God’s love and faithfulness, we will repeat that sequence, on a larger scale, focusing on Christ’s redemption. We begin again with sin—not the Fall but with the murder of Abel by Cain.

With Cain’s birth, the narrative begins in hope. Childbearing was seen as honoring and imitating the Creator. “With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man,” Eve said (v. 1). One translation has it, “I have created

a man just as the Lord did!” Then something goes terribly wrong. God accepts Abel’s offering but not Cain’s, no doubt because of their differing heart attitudes and obedience. God hadn’t given up on Cain, though, as He counseled him to resist temptation (vv. 6–7). “Sin is crouching at your door,” He warned. “Crouching” is an ancient Babylonian word referring to a demon waiting to pounce. It also suggests a hunting animal closing in on its prey. Temptation is a serious life-and-death struggle! Cain, however, gave in to temptation, murdered Abel, and tried to hide it from God (vv. 8–9). Still, God showed him mercy: Cain didn’t pay with his life, but instead was condemned to wander under God’s protection (vv. 10–16).

▶ Just as God personally advised Cain about fighting temptation, in the same way Jesus is available to help us resist sin. After all, Jesus Himself was tempted in every way just as we are (Heb. 4:15–16). He stands waiting to help!

Pray with Us

Please join us in prayer for Moody Radio’s Spring Share fundraising event that starts today and continues until the end of the week. Pray for listeners who tune in at this time and generously give to Christian radio.

Blood on the Doorframes

Read Exodus 12:1–28

Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. —Hebrews 9:22

Inspired by a family friend whose blood donation saved his life when he was a baby, Marco Perez decided to do the same. An Air Force veteran and postal worker in Texas, he donated blood every two weeks (the maximum possible). In 2017, he gave his 100th gallon! Said a spokesperson for the blood bank where Perez gives: “It’s safe to say he’s saved over 1,500 lives with his donations.”

Blood saved lives in today’s story as well. At the Lord’s command, Moses had been confronting Pharaoh, demanding that the Israelite slaves be set free. Nine plagues later, however, Pharaoh had failed to change his mind. The tenth plague would be the last straw. To demonstrate God’s absolute power over life and death and finally break Pharaoh’s will, every firstborn in Egypt would die. This would be “judgment on all the gods of Egypt” (v. 12).

What about the Israelites? They were instructed to slaughter and roast an unblemished lamb, cooking

it with certain bitter herbs and eat it with bread made without yeast. Furthermore, they were to take the blood of that lamb and put it on the tops of the doorframes of houses in which this special meal would be eaten (vv. 7, 22). Death would not come to anyone in these houses (vv. 13, 23).

The blood was a symbol of substitution—of one life given for another (Lev. 17:11), as the ram in the thicket that had taken Isaac’s place (Gen. 22:13–14). The principle? “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb. 9:22; 1 John 1:7). This event, called Passover, is so crucial in the history of Israel that it signals its very beginning (v. 2). It would become a defining narrative, passed down from generation to generation (vv. 14, 17, 24–27).

► The Book of Exodus was our *Today in the Word* topic for October 2019. If you missed it, why not go to our web page and study it? Or, if you need a review, this and other back issues are available to you at any time.

Pray with Us

Will you include in your prayers Moody’s president, Dr. Mark Jobe, as he interacts with Moody Radio’s listeners during Share this week? Pray with Dr. Jobe for the success of Share and that Moody Radio’s words and music will honor our Father.

God's Law on the Doorframes

Read Deuteronomy 6:1–12

Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.—Deuteronomy 6:9

As an enslaved 13-year-old, future abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass trusted in Christ for salvation. One biographer observed: “Frederick always hungered for knowledge, but after his conversion he had an insatiable desire to read and understand the Bible.” At that time, slaves were not allowed to read, much less own books. Nonetheless, Douglass would search the gutters for discarded pages of Scripture. When he found one, he would carefully wash and dry it before reading it and added it to his collection.

Douglass’s passion for God’s Word puts us to shame! God’s commands are to be always on our hearts and minds. We’re to teach them to our children and talk about them during all our daily life activities (v. 7). This passage gives the greatest commandment—to love God with our whole selves (v. 5)—which is founded on the greatest truth—only God is worthy of worship (v. 4). Jewish people today tie *phylacteries* to their foreheads and

left arms, and put *mezuzot* on the doorframes of their houses. The biblical context, however, suggests that the instructions in verses 8–9 are not literal but figurative. God’s Word is to be at the center of our lives, including both thoughts (head) and actions (hands).

This image of a doorframe (v. 9) is similar to yesterday’s, referring to an entire home or family. To write Scripture on your doorframe symbolically indicates that your family is committed to worship and obedience to the Lord. Even talking of doorframes while living in tents—which is where the Israelites were when they received this command—was an expression of their faith in God.

► What Bible verses do you have posted or hanging in your home? Do they accurately represent your spiritual priorities or of your family? If you and those in your house were to choose one verse or passage to live by during the next six months, what would it be?

Pray with Us

Today’s passage from Deuteronomy reminds us of the importance and even the beauty of God’s Law, given to Jewish people. Let’s ask the Lord to help us give His Word preeminence in our hearts and minds, as well as our homes.

The Narrow Door of Salvation

Read Luke 13:22–30

But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.—Matthew 7:14

According to research by the Barna Group, people who don't talk about faith are motivated by either "avoidance or ambivalence." When asked why religious talk makes them change the subject, participants explained: (1) "Religious conversations always seem to create tension or arguments" (28%); or (2) "I'm not religious and don't care about these kinds of topics" (23%). Many unbelievers object to the claim that Christ is the *only* way to God. Nonetheless, Scripture is very clear about this point. Jesus said in Matthew 7:13–14: "Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

When someone asked Jesus, "Are only a few people going to be saved?" (Luke 13:23), He gave a similar answer: "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to" (v. 24). He followed this answer with

a scary scenario in which the doors of the kingdom were shut and entry denied (vv. 25–28).

Why did Jesus emphasize exclusion? It is helpful to understand the cultural context. The Jewish people assumed they would be part of God's kingdom simply because of their heritage. Jesus, however, would one day tell people who did not trust in Him for salvation, "I don't know you" (v. 25; see also Matt. 7:21–23). This is illustrated by His parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31–46). Jesus Himself is the only door or gate through which we can obtain eternal life (see March 22). Only through Him will people from all over the world be admitted to God's kingdom (v. 29).

► Today, it's more important than ever to share the truth of Christ firmly and clearly, but with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15). Consider how you can calmly and clearly share your faith with someone you know who does not believe.

Pray with Us

Today's devotional teaches us to share the good news and our testimony. For *Today in the Word*, this community-gathering place is our website and social media pages. Pray for our ministry, helping people find the "narrow road that leads to life."

Open or Shut?

Read Matthew 25:1–13

Keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour. —Matthew 25:13

Pastor and author Brian G. Hedges says that spiritual watchfulness or vigilance is “our most neglected spiritual discipline.” Spiritual watchfulness involves—through self-examination, prayer, and accountability—actively guarding our hearts against sin. He urges us to keep our focus on the Lord: “Our goal in keeping our hearts isn’t to keep them empty, but to make room for Christ to dwell in our hearts through faith (Eph. 3:17).”

Watchfulness is the main point of Jesus’ parable about the virgins or bridesmaids (v. 13). A wedding in that culture would begin with the bridegroom and his friends picking up the bride at her home. The marriage ceremony would take place, then the entire wedding party would return to the groom’s home for a banquet and celebration (reception). The exact schedule was uncertain. The bridegroom’s arrival time was not known, and the bridesmaids grew sleepy while waiting (v. 5). To remain ready, they needed enough oil for

their lamps (vv. 3–4). And the main difference between those who were ready and those who weren’t was wisdom (v. 2). Why didn’t the wise ones share their oil? Because, in this case, responsibility was a personal issue (v. 9).

The consequences of being “sleepy” were real (vv. 10–12). Those who weren’t ready wouldn’t enter the wedding feast, which here refers to the kingdom of God (Rev. 19:9). Christ is our Bridegroom. He will say, “I don’t know you,” to unredeemed sinners (Matt. 7:21–23). The results of eternal exclusion will be devastating. Payment for their sins will have been available through the blood of Christ, but by not trusting Him for salvation they will lose everything.

► What about you? Are you ready? The only way to be assured of your salvation is to trust in the name of Christ (John 1:12–13). Those of us who are saved must remain vigilant. The Bridegroom could return at any time!

Pray with Us

Lord Jesus, indeed we “do not know the day or the hour” of your return (Matt. 25:13), but we ask you to make us ready for the day of the wedding of the Lamb. Help us watch and pray and be ready with enough oil in our lamps.

Gate for the Sheep

Read John 10:1–15

I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.—John 10:9

The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* explains that in Scripture as in life, “Doors and doorways are places of transition.” Being on the right or wrong side of a door or gate can mean the difference between safety or vulnerability, revelation or concealment, and hospitality or exclusion. When Jesus called Himself the “gate for the sheep” (v. 7) in His Good Shepherd discourse, He meant that He is the only entryway for salvation.

In today’s passage, Jesus identified Himself as both the gate and the shepherd. What does it mean for Him to be the shepherd (vv. 11, 14)? The true shepherd enters by the gate (v. 2). By contrast, thieves (false teachers) climb over the fence to steal (v. 1), and hired hands (poor leaders) run away when danger comes, since they have no personal investment in the flock (vv. 12–13). The Good Shepherd knows His sheep by name (v. 3), leads them for their own benefit (v. 4), gives them a

full life (v. 10), and even “lays down his life for the sheep” (vv. 11, 15).

What does it mean for Jesus to be the gate (v. 7)? “Whoever enters through me will be saved” (v. 9). There is no other way! The verse continues: “They will come in and go out, and find pasture.” This doesn’t mean you can go in and out of God’s kingdom, or lose your salvation. Instead, “come in and go out” is a *merism*—a figure of speech using two extremes to refer to a whole. We can paraphrase this line as, “In everything they do, the sheep will find pasture.” The Good Shepherd takes care of us sheep. The blessings of His care include a close relationship, provision of needs, protection, salvation, and an abundant life!

► Scripture often pictures God as a shepherd, most famously in Psalm 23. “The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing” (v. 1). Make time to read this psalm throughout the day today, perhaps at every meal, thanking God for His provision.

Pray with Us

We praise Christ today as our Shepherd who knows each one of us by name, and as the Gate—the only way to salvation. We praise Him—the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Suffering Outside the Gate

Read Hebrews 13:9–17

Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.—Hebrews 13:12

Christians use the term *good news* to refer to the gospel. We celebrate the good and life-changing news found in the message of salvation given through Jesus Christ. But good doesn't equal easy. While Christ's death purchased our redemption and His resurrection guaranteed our eternal future, we are wrong to think that the Christian life will never encounter difficulty.

The heart of the gospel, after all, is that Jesus "suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood" (v. 12).

Blood atonement (see March 18) and redemptive suffering—this is the source of the salvation and grace that strengthens our hearts (v. 9). The Old Testament sacrifices foreshadowed Christ's sacrifice. On the Day of Atonement, blood would be taken into the Most Holy Place on behalf of the sins of the people. The body of the sacrificial animal, however, would be "burned outside the camp" (outside the community) as unclean (v. 11). We are made clean by the blood of Jesus;

His body was tortured and crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem.

Legalism (or continuing to obey only the Law of Moses) is not the right response for us as followers of Jesus (vv. 9–10). Rather, we should "go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore" (v. 13). This means accepting any suffering and disgrace that comes to us as His disciples, for the sake of eternity (v. 14; see John 15:18–21). We can even rejoice in this privilege (v. 15)! We should also do good as we're able and share what we have with others (v. 16). Finally, we should submit to our church leaders, so that their ministries won't be burdensome (v. 17).

► Do you sometimes fear publicly identifying with Christ? We need to willingly accept any suffering that comes from following Jesus. As the classic hymn says: "Who is on the Lord's side? . . . Master, wilt Thou keep us, by Thy grace divine, Always on the Lord's side—Savior, always Thine!" (see Luke 12:8–9).

Pray with Us

As we ponder the words of Hebrews chapter 13 today, we thank Jesus for His sacrifice, for making us His disciples, and for the new life He gave us. We ask for strength and courage to share what we have with others.

Jesus Stands at the Door

Read Revelation 3:14–22

*If anyone hears my voice and opens the door,
I will come in and eat with that person,
and they with me.—Revelation 3:20*

One comedian observed that, in today's culture, we don't always look forward to an unexpected knock on the door. While in past decades, the family would have rushed to open the door and welcome their guest, today we are more likely to dim the lights and retreat. We are suspicious about who might be visiting and wonder why they stopped by unannounced.

Let's pray that's not the case when Jesus stands at our door and knocks (v. 20). Today's verse is often quoted to indicate Jesus' love for sinners. While these things are certainly true, this is not what this verse means in context. How do we know? To begin, this passage is a letter to the church at Laodicea (the seventh and last in the series of letters found in Revelation, chapters 2 and 3). These words are addressed to believers, not unbelievers. Sadly, these believers are lukewarm in their commitment to Christ (vv. 15–16), putting their confidence in material wealth. They're oblivious to their true spiritual state (v. 17).

This is a discipline situation; a change of heart is needed (v. 19). When Jesus stands at the door and knocks, He's not there as a guest but as their master, calling the church to repent and stop being halfhearted followers. They need to put their confidence in the "white clothes" of salvation, not in material wealth. If they answer the door and respond to His call, He will come in (forgive) and eat with them (restore close fellowship).

Christ's correction is motivated by love (Prov. 3:11–12; Heb. 12:5–11). A chastened church is not "damaged goods" but remains the Body of Christ. Therefore, the letter ends with a promise—for those who respond well to the discipline—of reward and victory with Him (vv. 21–22).

► The wealthy city of Laodicea was known for banking, medicine, and textiles (thus the choice of images in verse 18). We, too, live in a prosperous and materialistic society and face many of the same temptations. Do we likewise need to listen for Jesus' knock?

Pray with Us

A familiar image of Jesus knocking on the heart's door of lukewarm Christians is a warning to the church today. Ask God to give us warm and passionate hearts, open to His will, and in close fellowship with Him.

Locks Are No Barrier to Jesus

Read John 20:19–31

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. —John 14:6

Do you put too much faith in your career? A staff writer for *The Atlantic* recently observed that for some “work has morphed into a religious identity—promising identity, transcendence, and community, but failing to deliver.” He warned that “workism” is a dead end, “setting itself up for collective anxiety, mass disappointment, and inevitable burnout.”

The only faith that can satisfy is faith in Christ, because only He is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). Not all the doors and gates in the Bible’s redemption story are metaphorical. In today’s reading, the risen Christ demonstrated the nature of His glorified human body by miraculously passing through closed and locked doors (vv. 19, 26). The disciples were hiding behind them in fear. Would the Jewish leaders, having killed the rabbi, target them next?

Instead of soldiers coming to arrest them, Jesus appeared. He greeted them, “Peace be with you!” (v. 19). There was no blame assigned for their

individual and collective Passion Week failures. He met them where they were, showing them His scars to confirm His identity (vv. 20, 27). Their fear and doubt were transformed into joy!

Jesus then sent them into the world with the good news of the gospel (v. 21). He even gave them a pre-Pentecost taste of the Holy Spirit to empower them (v. 22). The message was that forgiveness has already been accomplished (v. 23)—all that hearers need to do is believe in the name of Christ to receive God’s gift of salvation.

Recording these words and events helped the apostle John fulfill his purpose of writing this Gospel: to inspire belief “that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (v. 31).

▶ Let’s sing praises to our risen Savior today. Do you have a favorite hymn or song that celebrates the resurrection? Why not sing or listen to it? My personal choices would be “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today” and David Crowder’s “Forgiven.”

Pray with Us

Our reading today celebrates Jesus as “the Messiah, the Son of God” (John 20:31). Let’s thank Him that we “may have life in his name” (v. 31) and be encouraged as well that His gift of salvation and forgiveness is available to all who believe.

God Opens Prison Doors

Read Acts 12:1–18

*He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets prisoners free. — Psalm 146:7*

The Jewish leaders were so jealous of Jesus' disciples that they arrested them and threw them in prison (Acts 5:17, 18). "But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out" (v. 19). Imagine the captain of the guard's surprise when, in the morning, the prison cell was empty and the disciples were standing in the temple and teaching. "They never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah" (v. 42).

God has the power to open prison doors, literally and figuratively. Just as locked doors were no barrier to the risen Christ, they were no barrier to His followers. This didn't mean Christian prisoners were always freed, as in Acts 5. The apostle Paul, for example, was imprisoned two separate times.

But today's passage does narrate another miraculous release. Herod found that persecuting the new sect that called Jesus the Messiah and Son of God was a popular thing to do

(vv. 1–3). He killed James, the brother of John, and put Peter in prison. Peter was shackled directly to two soldiers, with two more standing guard outside. Nonetheless, an angel easily rescued him (v. 7). His chains fell off, and the iron gate of Antonia Fortress, the military base where he was being held, "opened for them by itself" (v. 10).

Peter assumed this was all a vision, but when he realized he was actually free he went straight to a local house church. Though they were praying for him, they hadn't looked for such an immediate answer. Imagine their surprise when he appeared at the door (v. 14)!

► Are you waiting on the Lord today? Remember that God holds the power to free you physically, emotionally, and spiritually. When Paul and Silas were in jail in Philippi (Acts 16:16–34) they sang hymns while they waited, showing faith. What a great example to imitate!

Pray with Us

Today's devotional gives us an opportunity to remember in prayer *Today in the Word's* prison ministry. This devotional goes to inmates in hundreds of prisons across the country, and we pray that the Lord will open many hearts to His Word.

Victory Over These Gates

Read Matthew 16:13–20

On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.—Matthew 16:18

Open Doors USA compiles an annual World Watch List of “the 50 countries where it’s most dangerous to follow Jesus.” In 2019, the top five nations on the list were North Korea, Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya, and Pakistan. One of every nine Christians worldwide experience high levels of persecution, and eleven Christians each day are killed for their faith.

Truly, to follow Jesus one must count the cost, but in the end we know it will be worth it all because He has won the victory: “On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (v. 18). Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” (v. 13). Their answers reflected the confusion of the crowds (v. 14). Then He asked, “Who do *you* say I am?” (v. 15). Peter, given understanding by God, famously confessed Jesus to be “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (vv. 16–17). Verses 18–19 then employ three images—rocks, gates, and keys—to describe the future of

Messiah’s kingdom. Peter’s role is highlighted, as explained in the *Moody Bible Commentary*: “[I]t was Peter who, using the keys of the kingdom, opened the kingdom for the Jewish people (Acts 2), the Samaritans (Acts 8), and the Gentiles (Acts 10), so that Jesus’ prophecy about Peter seems to have actually come true in that he does function as the foundation of the Church.”

The gate image indicates that the power of death cannot stand against Christ’s church and the life-giving power of God. Hades or Sheol is the realm of the dead, protected, as it were, by its city gate. The church in this picture is on the attack, assaulting those gates and defeating by God’s power all the forces of evil!

► Open Doors USA’s website offers free prayer resources to help us, as individuals and churches intercede for persecuted believers worldwide. We would encourage you to visit their website and use their resources to pray for those enduring persecution.

Pray with Us

We invite you to pray for the persecuted church in many parts of the world. Today’s Scripture shows that Christ’s church has life-giving power, and the power of death cannot stand against it.

The Door Will Be Opened

Read Luke 11:1–13

*Everyone who asks receives;
the one who seeks finds.—Luke 11:10*

Have you heard the term “arrow prayer” or “javelin prayer”? These are short, perhaps urgent prayers that you can pray throughout the day. A longer prayer time or praying with a friend might not be possible at any given moment, but God is always listening and hears not only our spoken words but our heart’s language as well. Practicing short prayers can help us obey Paul’s exhortation to “pray continually” (1 Thess. 5:17).

When Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He began with a model (vv. 1–4). Today’s reading is a shorter version of the “Lord’s Prayer” (Matt. 6:9–13). Its ingredients include worship, submission to the will of God, and requests for physical (daily bread) and spiritual (forgiveness) provision, as well as one against temptation.

Second, Jesus exhorted His disciples to be bold and persistent in prayer (vv. 5–8). He told a story of asking a friend for bread at midnight. To us, this sounds borderline inappropriate, especially when the

word is translated “shameless audacity” (NIV) or “impudence” (ESV). But this idea of “presuming on a friend” shows deep confidence in the relationship and is thus a picture of strong faith.

Third, we should pray with expectation (vv. 9–10): If we ask, it will be given. If we seek, we’ll find. If we knock, the door will be opened. Prayer is not magical or manipulative, but God loves us and is eager to respond to our prayers. We don’t need to beg or appease a cranky deity. Instead, our Lord invites us to bring everything to Him in prayer (Phil. 4:6; 1 Peter 5:7). Fourth and summing up, Jesus viewed prayer as relational (vv. 11–13). God is our Father—of course He desires to give us good things! The best gift, now given to all believers, is the Holy Spirit.

► The verbs in verse 9 are present imperatives: *Keep* asking, *keep* seeking, *keep* knocking. Today you might focus on one prayer request throughout the day, asking God persistently, boldly, audaciously—even shamelessly—either to grant your request or change it.

Pray with Us

Today’s key verse says, “Everyone who asks receives.” We invite you to intercede for our country, our families, our leaders, and workplaces. In addition, following the prompt in the devotional, focus on one prayer request especially close to you.

Doors for the Gospel

Read 1 Corinthians 16:5–14

*A great door for effective work
has opened to me. — 1 Corinthians 16:9*

Missionary Evie “Granny” Brand was 68 years old. Her mission board told her she was required to retire, but when she begged they granted her one more year in India. At the end of that year, she did retire . . . then stayed on independently for another 24 years! During that time, she evangelized hard-to-reach mountain villages, dispensed needed medicine, and rescued abandoned children. She died in 1974.

Evie had an unquenchable passion for the gospel. So did the apostle Paul! In today’s reading he rejoiced that “a great door for effective work has opened to me” (NIV) or “a door of great opportunity stands wide open for me” (NET) (v. 9). He used this expression much as we might today, to indicate an “open door” of opportunity or favorable conditions. As another example, he asked the Colossians to pray that “God may open a door for our message,” even though he was imprisoned at the time (Col. 4:3).

Open doors are often seen as God-given opportunities. When Paul

and Barnabas reported back after their first missionary journey, they said, “God . . . had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27). Apparently, though, this didn’t mean one was obligated to walk through every door. Paul wrote that “the Lord had opened a door for me” in Troas, but he left Troas after not finding Titus there (2 Cor. 2:12–13). He highly valued all his ministry partners, including Timothy and Apollos (vv. 10–12). Interestingly, Paul also seemed to view the presence of opposition as part of the open door (v. 9). In other words, if Satan and the world were responding negatively, God must be at work in this strategic place! His exhortations to faith, courage, and love show how to respond and reveal keys to success in ministry (vv. 13–14).

► What doors for sharing the gospel has God opened in your life? Have you been looking for them or knocking on them? Is doing so a high priority for you? If we don’t know what to say, God can give us the right words (Luke 21:15; Eph. 6:19).

Pray with Us

Lord, may you open the doors for the gospel that so far have been closed. Give us the boldness to knock on closed doors and share the gospel with unbelievers. Lord, give us the right words and sensitivity to people’s circumstances.

No One Can Shut It

Read Revelation 3:7–13

*What he opens no one can shut,
and what he shuts no one can open. — Revelation 3:7*

The 1893 World's Fair in Chicago made the controversial decision to remain open on Sundays. Many Christian leaders responded by boycotting the Fair, but D. L. Moody said, "Let us open so many preaching places and present the gospel so attractively that people will want to come and hear it." His efforts were so successful that on a single day, more than 130,000 people heard the good news at tent meetings.

In his brief letter to the church at Philadelphia (in modern Turkey), Christ promised "an open door that no one can shut" (v. 8). This image corresponds with the fact that He is the One "who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open" (v. 7). In this case, the "open door" represents not only opportunity but the authority to enter God's kingdom. In other words, this is a guaranteed promise that they will enter the kingdom, no matter what difficulties they're facing at the present time. Though they've been pressured to deny the name of Christ, they've

held firm and now receive from Christ Himself this word of hope.

Christ encouraged them with several other promises. Their opponents, false Jews characterized here as the "synagogue of Satan," will be forced to acknowledge their wrongs (v. 9). Christ will return "soon" (v. 11). And if they continue to endure patiently, they will receive a crown or eternal reward! Thanks to Christ's victory, those who enter the kingdom will be privileged to dwell forever with the Lord. They will be triple-marked forever as God's people with His name, the name of the New Jerusalem, and Christ's own "new name" (v. 12).

▶ If you ever doubt your ability to reach others for Christ, consider these words by D. L. Moody: "If this world is going to be reached, I am convinced that it must be done by men and women of average talent. After all, there are comparatively few people in this world who have great talents."

Pray with Us

So far this month we've studied many gates and doors, as well as many promises of our Lord. Today, we praise God for His precious promises in Revelation 3—that His people will enter the kingdom and will dwell forever with the Lord.

Gates of the New Jerusalem

Read Revelation 21:9–27

*On no day will its gates ever be shut,
for there will be no night there. —Revelation 21:25*

After crossing the River of Death in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian and Hopeful continue on to Mount Zion and the Celestial City. The King's trumpeters welcome them with joy. Approaching the gate, the two pilgrims find "written over it, in letters of gold, 'Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the Tree of Life; and may enter in through the gates into the city' [Rev. 22:14]."

After the Fall, the door to Eden had been closed (Gen. 3:23–24). But one day the gates of heaven and of the New Jerusalem will open for us, not because of our own merit but because of the shed blood of the Lamb of God.

The Book of Revelation describes the New Jerusalem as a city brilliantly lit with the glory of God (v. 11). It has twelve gates—the tribes of Israel (v. 12)—and twelve foundations—the apostles (v. 14). It is called "the bride, the wife of the Lamb" because God's people live there (v. 9), that is, "those whose names are written in the Lamb's

book of life" (v. 27). The foundations are decorated with a colorful variety of precious and beautiful gems (vv. 19–20). The streets are paved with pure gold, and each of the twelve gates is a single pearl (v. 21). The city gates will always be open, for this place is absolutely secure (v. 25; Isa. 60:11). According to the angel's measurements, the city is perfectly symmetrical (vv. 15–17)—a cube, just like the Most Holy Place in the temple.

Notice that no temple is needed here! The entire city is a Most Holy Place, for the Lord is actually present here at all times (v. 22). His glory lights the city (v. 23). All the world will kneel before Him (vv. 24–26)!

► Pearls have historically symbolized purity, humility, wisdom, and other virtues. Jesus used a valuable pearl as a symbol of the worth of the kingdom of God (Matt. 13:45–46). Rejoice today that one day we, like Christian and Hopeful, will walk through those "pearly gates"!

Pray with Us

As we come to the end of our Bible study and prayer this month, we pray that the truths and the lessons we learned will stay with us, that we will walk closer to Jesus, hear Him better, and love Him more.



Worried? Discouraged?

We all have moments when worry and discouragement creep into our lives. This beautiful collection of Bible verses will become your go-to antidote for worry. Find hope with this excerpt from *How to Overcome Worry* by Moody professor Winfred Neely.

This mini-booklet is our thank-you for supporting *Today in the Word*. Together we are helping readers find God's strength and wisdom through His Word.

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Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.

Psalm 118:1

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