

VOICES OF FAITH



28 REFLECTIONS FROM THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY OF
PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT—THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

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Welcome to this devotional collection featuring God's divine interaction with the peoples of the *African Diaspora*, meaning the millions of Africans removed from the continent between the 1500s and 1800s during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. They were scattered to the Americas, Caribbean, and Europe. But that's not the extent of their story. This collection traces African footsteps in biblical times centuries *before* the slave trade and highlights their descendants' continuing relationship with God.

Though vast in number and diverse in culture, Africa's descendants share some things in common: We love to pray and worship, treasure our elders, appreciate our iconic leaders, care for our communities, honor our mothers, nurture new generations, and protect those in need. Our Creator has given us life, kept us, and caused us to persevere across continents for millennia. And He has promised a forever home to all who have faith in Him.

We pray these articles about this big story and great faith enrich and encourage you—beginning with Karen Ellis' "A Refreshing Reminder" that reveals Africans' faith crossing Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, and the Americas. Thank you for joining us.



A REFRESHING REMINDER

Thus far the Lord has helped us.

1 SAMUEL 7:12

As a seminary professor teaching students about Christian life among those on society's margins, I often begin lessons by raising an *Ebenezer* as 1 Samuel 7:1–14 records. The prophet announced God's victory over Israel's enemies by placing a "rock of help" in view: "Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, 'Thus far the LORD has helped us'" (v. 12). My students and I speak about the places where we see God has been moving in *our* lives and communities.

These days, our cultural habit may be to put more weight on the places where the church got things horribly wrong. Raising *Ebenezers* refreshes and reminds us of the places where God's people walked more closely to His heart and mission to call and keep a people for Himself.

One reminder we enjoy studying is the powerful endurance of an obscure Christian community under horrific conditions beginning in the 1700s. These Afro-Caribbean Christians were persecuted on the tiny, Dutch-colonized, Caribbean island of St. Thomas. They experienced regular beatings with clubs and swords, gang assaults from resentful society, and even the unjust, months-long imprisonment of key leaders, forcing them to preach from the jailhouse window to their faithful who gathered in the open air outside.

Though they had no weapon on their side but the Word of God, the Moravian Afro-Caribbean Christians were still seen by

the dominant social group as the greatest threat to life, property, and power. Much like the way Western observers have perceived many totalitarian regimes in history that have all firepower, courts, and culture on their side, Christianity was still seen then as the greatest threat—for simply asserting the truth of Scripture: that God has granted all men and women dignity, freedom from oppression, and the right to worship as they please.

But revival began to emerge in St. Thomas; testimonies whispered ear to ear in the night watches told about redeemed plantation owners struck with genuine conversion and grief over the slave trade. As well, Africans—bound to other traditions kept by their ancestors—likewise were struck by the dignity, hope, and perfect liberation the gospel offered. None were safe from the call of God to repentance.

A group of leaders arose, one of the first African-led Protestant churches in the Americas. The more they grew in Christ, and the more their New Testament-style commitment to give limb

Christianity was seen as the greatest threat—for simply asserting the truth of Scripture: that God has granted all men and women dignity, freedom from oppression, and the right to worship as they please.

and life for the cause of Christ spread, the more of a threat they became to the unbelieving and depraved culture around them. As they sought to teach their Sunday school lessons on the plantations and evangelize the island, they faced obstacles and horrors: amputated body parts littered their path as warnings to stop their Christian activities; they were scourged, their Bibles confiscated, their homes ransacked and destroyed.

In 1739, their leaders composed and signed a missive to the monarchy of Denmark, referring to themselves as the “600 Black Christian scholars” on the island. In part it read:

Despite all oppression by those who have come to beat and injure us when our pastors teaches us about the Savior, by those who burn our books, call our baptism the baptism of dogs, and call [our congregation] beasts, declaring that

Negroes must not be saved and that a baptized Negro is not more than kindling wood for the flames of hell. Many a Negro has suffered the amputation of feet and hands as punishment for his pursuit. . . . As for ourselves, we would gladly place our heads under the axe in defense of our congregation and for the sake of Lord Jesus, if our masters have us killed, as they say. . .

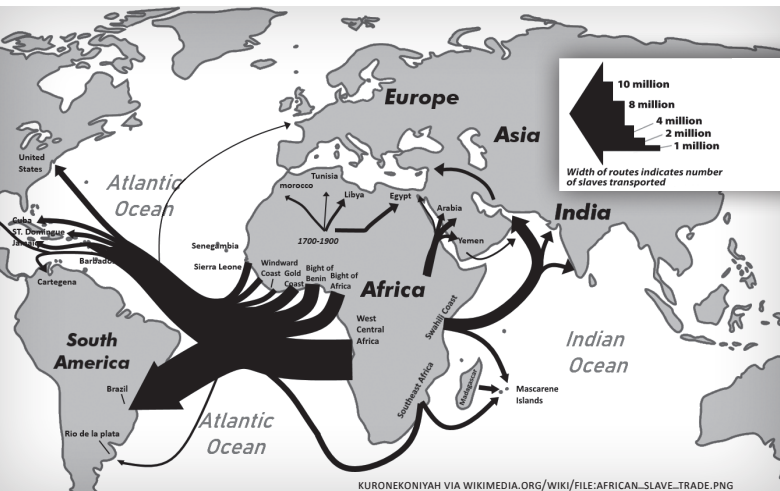
Magdalena, a free woman of color and elderess over the congregation, wrote boldly to the Queen of Denmark. She wrote in her native Gold Coast tongue (*Fon*) on behalf of the entire congregation. And she spoke as the equal the Bible taught her she was; woman to woman, mother to mother, human to human:

Great Queen! At the time when I lived in Papa [Popo] in Africa, I served the Lord Masu. Now I have come into the land of the Whites, and they will not allow me to serve the Lord Jesus. Previously, I did not have any reason to serve Him, but now I do. I am very sad in my heart that the Negro women on St Thomas are not allowed to serve the Lord Jesus. The Whites do not want to obey Him. Let them do as they wish. But when the poor Black Brethren and Sisters want to serve the Lord Jesus, they are looked upon as maroons. If the Queen thinks it fitting, please pray to the Lord Jesus for us and let her intercede with the King to allow [our pastor] to preach the Lord's word, so that we can come to know the Lord and so that he can baptize us in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

As their pleas for the right to worship without molestation welled up, hundreds inside their congregation ultimately joined their signatures to Magdalena's.

The monarchy remained silent to the abuses; beatings continued and strict curfews curbed their worship but could not hinder the spread of the gospel. The faithful were interrogated





Transatlantic Slave Trade Data: *Routes from Africa, 1500–1900.*

and lashed severely. Despite the terror, like so many in the African American church did, they met in secret to cry out beyond earthly monarchs to the King of Kings, interceding and teaching in defiance.

Finally, in 1739, the reign of terror began to subside, and the King of Denmark was moved to intervene to protect the congregants, their homes, and their meetings.

That the blood of these St. Thomas saints served as the seed of their church is a miracle to revisit, not only during Black History month, but all year round and for *all* the saints. These saints remind us of the lasting power of the Ancient Story in all its New Testament glory. Raising such Ebenezers—particularly of overlooked stories—brings life and raises our hope.



Joshua set up the twelve stones that had been in the middle of the Jordan.

STONES CAN SPEAK

Stones not only speak; stones tell stories. Of wind and storm and pain. Even water cannot silence stones buried deep below.

Folk said it didn't happen. No slave ship could have arrived state-side in 1860! The international slave trade ended in 1808. But living stones cannot be silenced, not even by the azure deep. They found the *Clotilda*, buried in the delta not far from Mobile, the last slave ship to bring Africans to America. One hundred and ten souls hidden in the ship's hull arrived in Alabama, but the schooner, the hard evidence of their illegal capture, was burned and scuttled to hide the crime. And it seemed the slaves' survival, endurance, and creation of a city called Africatown would remain just a story. But like the underwater stones in the Jordan River of generations earlier, these living stones tell the story of determination and faith.

When the Israelites crossed the Jordan on dry ground, they set up a memorial of twelve stones on the shore. Joshua also set up a memorial of twelve stones, but these he placed under the water, where the priests' feet stood when the waters stopped flowing so that the Israelites could cross over (JOSHUA 3-4). These stones tell the miracle of faith, the faith to remain standing in the water while others cross over. Now we are the memorial—living stones, standing, still speaking, that others may cross over.

GEORGIA A. HILL

What's your crossing-over story? How will you stand up and speak your faith to help someone else cross over to Jesus?

Lord, You reign in all the earth! Please lift me, Lord, from my deep dark places. Thank You for giving this living stone a story to tell. In Jesus' name, amen.

*Jesus answered, "No more of this!"
and he touched the man's ear and healed him.*

SWORD OR SUPPLICATION?

In *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu recounted his harrowing experience visiting Rwanda a year after the genocide of 1994. He went as president of an ecumenical body that made pastoral visits to churches in countries experiencing crises. Perhaps none had shaken him to his core like his visit to Ntarama, a village near Rwanda's capital, Kigali, where the new government had not removed the corpses of Tutsis murdered in a church.

Tutu described the church as being "like a mortuary, with bodies lying as they had fallen the year before during the massacre." How could this nation ever heal and move forward, particularly given its vicious "cycle of reprisal and counter reprisal"?

Jesus halted Peter's violent counterattack against His enemies who accosted Him near Gethsemane (SEE MARK 14:32). After Peter drew his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant, Jesus reprimanded, "No more of this!" and He touched the man and healed Him (LUKE 22:51).

Like Jesus, Tutu chose supplication—a posture of humility or making a humble entreaty to God—over the sword in his post-apartheid home country of South Africa, inspiring not only his nation, but also Rwanda and countless others entrenched in racism, genocide, war, and other atrocities.

Truthfully, we don't have innate tendencies to overcome feelings of bitterness, revenge, and hatred when we're violated, but through Christ's power and might we can forgive and forge a brighter future.

TONDRA L. LODER-JACKSON

Do you find it difficult to forgive personal affronts or social injustices? Are you willing to open your heart, mind, and soul to the assurance that Christ can and will help you forgive?

Lord, I forgive; help my unforgiveness.

You are the God who sees me.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

When Africans were stolen from their homeland, taken on ships across the Middle Passage, and stripped of everything, they also lost their names. Millions of people were treated as property, without humanity. But God has never forsaken us.

Hagar, the Egyptian slave woman to Sarai, wandered alone in the desert, pregnant and unsheltered. Her childless mistress and her husband, Abram, used her as a surrogate when they grew impatient waiting for God's promise of an heir. They never even referred to Hagar by name, yet God's watchful eyes found her. Discerning her despair and need of rescue, His protection arrived in angelic form. God revealed full knowledge of and concern toward Hagar and her situation. He called her by name, extended counsel, and spoke a covenant blessing of freedom over her unborn son. Appreciative and in awe, Hagar also named the Lord, "You are the God who sees me" (GENESIS 16:13).

Hagar's sentiment lends understanding of what's in a name. There's a deep indication of worth and personal connection, hope and promise. As God's beloved children, when life overwhelms and tempts us with feelings of isolation or hopelessness, He remains close. Hagar experienced this as God delivered her again when evicted and struggling in the wilderness as a distraught single mother to her son, Ishmael, who almost died from inadequate sustenance. God knows our name and our pain and responds to us out of His faithfulness.

CHERIE TRAHAN

Can you remember a time when God's answers to your prayers revealed how much you and the struggles you face matter to Him?

Lord, I'm grateful for Your personal and attentive love; it shields me from discouragement and the thought of giving up.

*We are hard pressed on every side,
but not crushed.*

PRESSING IN PRESSURE

I recently returned from a beautiful, eye-opening experience in Ghana. I explored the rich Aburi Eastern Region, Mfanta Village, and visited the Cape Coast Slave Castle where more than four million Africans were transported across the world and forced into slavery. At every turn, I was reminded of my ancestors' hardships and the personal struggles of being a Black woman in America. More than a century after the abolition of chattel slavery, Black people experience pressures resulting from that evil.

In his letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul wrote to people who were divided and under pressure. Many in this community were experiencing economic, religious, and social pressures of that day. Paul also defended his ministry and called out false teachers. Pressure was present for Paul and the believers in Corinth. People often persevere under the unimaginable. What do we do when faced with opposition? I close my eyes when others try to make us feel inadequate and remember our "power is from God" (v. 7), persecution won't destroy us (v. 9), and we have signs and memories that lead us to freedom (v. 10).

Let us face the troubles of our lives and be encouraged to know our worth. We can see love through the life of Jesus Christ and tell others about Him (v. 15). Like those forced into slavery off the shores of Ghana, we must persevere in the midst of our worldly pressures.

BRITTINI L. PALMER

**What do you do when faced with pressure you never asked for?
What can keep you pressing?**

*Holy One, thank You for showing me through the lives of others
how to press in a divine direction, in the midst of pressure.*

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood.

THE GREATEST ESCAPE

At his master's death, my ancestor John Freeman Walls escaped North Carolinian slavery through the Underground Railroad. "Conductor" Harriet Tubman led hundreds like John to freedom along those secret routes with hiding places, including to Upper Canada—known as "New Canaan." The master's widow, Jane King, also left the South, making the perilous journey north to freedom alongside John.


God's promises, including those inscribed in the Exodus stories, have provoked hope of freedom for millions. Though slaves were forbidden to read, they could listen to sermons on Sundays, a highlight in their drudgery. God declared to the Israelite slaves: "I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment" (EXODUS 6:6). With that hope of God's deliverance within and the North Star above, Southern slaves moved toward freedom, along with others.

God endows each human with a free will that incites us to freedom. His command to Pharaoh was, "Let the Israelites go" (EXODUS 6:11). God inspires all people to pursue spiritual freedom through His Son, Jesus. All who have faith in Christ's life, death, and resurrection gain freedom from the power of sin through the power of His Holy Spirit. "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (JOHN 8:36).

KIM D. ELLIOTT

To whom do you turn when you find yourself facing bondage?

Thank You, God, for my ancestors, who stood fast in the liberty that comes from You. I look to You and give You all the praise!

 ¹ Then the LORD said to Moses, “Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh: Because of my mighty hand he will let them go; because of my mighty hand he will drive them out of his country.”

² God also said to Moses, “I am the LORD. ³ I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself fully known to them. ⁴ I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, where they resided as foreigners. ⁵ Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant.

⁶ “Therefore, say to the Israelites: ‘I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. ⁷ I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. ⁸ And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the LORD.’ ”

⁹ Moses reported this to the Israelites, but they did not listen to him because of their discouragement and harsh labor.

¹⁰ Then the LORD said to Moses, ¹¹ “Go, tell Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the Israelites go out of his country.”

¹² But Moses said to the LORD, “If the Israelites will not listen to me, why would Pharaoh listen to me, since I speak with faltering lips?”

Dark am I, yet lovely.

HANDCRAFTED BEAUTY

During a childhood visit with my grandmother in Georgia, someone mentioned *colored people*. I thought about my *crayons*. They were my best reference for color—*Pink and purple people?* I wondered. Adults lovingly explained *colored* used to be a way of describing Black people. People have also habitually supposed that those of a lighter color are more attractive and that the darker you are, the less desirable you are as a human being. Misperceptions paired with wrong words and actions rob others of their dignity and equality. Bias based on skin color is wrong.

In the Song of Songs, a woman, embraced by her beloved groom, worried whether her dark skin made her less appealing to him (1:5–6.) After laboring in the vineyard to support her family, she realized her sun-darkened color made her different. Her dark loveliness was affirmed. Some scholars interpret that the groom’s love for her symbolizes God’s love for His people.

For those in the African Diaspora pondering, *Does God embrace me and accept my Blackness?*—whatever shade we are—yes, God loves you and celebrates your color. God loves us because we are His, made in His image, the *imago Dei*, and our diversity in appearance provides a stunning reflection of His beauty. God created all of our colors. One’s skin color is not the only blessing God has given all of us; we have intrinsic worth because we are His.

MELODY L. COPENNY

Have you struggled with accepting yourself and your appearance, feeling you don’t fit what society says is “beautiful”?

Lord, give me eyes to see the beauty of who You’ve made me to be. Help me to see the exquisite reflection of Your creativity and intention in myself and in all people. In Jesus’ name, amen.



- ⁵ Dark am I, yet lovely,
daughters of Jerusalem,
dark like the tents of Kedar,
like the tent curtains of Solomon.
- ⁶ Do not stare at me because I am dark,
because I am darkened by the sun.
My mother's sons were angry with me
and made me take care of the vineyards;
my own vineyard I had to neglect.
- ⁷ Tell me, you whom I love,
where you graze your flock
and where you rest your sheep at midday.
Why should I be like a veiled woman
beside the flocks of your friends?
- ⁹ I liken you, my darling, to a mare
among Pharaoh's chariot horses.
- ¹⁰ Your cheeks are beautiful with earrings,
your neck with strings of jewels.
- ¹¹ We will make you earrings of gold,
studded with silver.
- ¹⁵ How beautiful you are, my darling!
Oh, how beautiful!
Your eyes are doves.

*Why then were you not afraid
to speak against my servant Moses?*

THE ROOT

We have come to admire his big sister for dutifully watching her little brother. As he floated into the arms of Pharaoh's daughter, Miriam was part of God's plan for protecting Moses, whom God later called to lead His people (EXODUS 2). We admire Miriam's celebratory dance as she led the women in praise and shared prophetic words after Moses led the Israelites through the Red Sea (EXODUS 15).


Yet, "Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. 'Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?' they asked. 'Hasn't he also spoken through us?' And the LORD heard this" (EXODUS 12:1-2). Aaron and Miriam's words were not simply racist; they revealed a deep jealousy of their brother's God-appointed relationship and role. God clearly showed His displeasure: "The anger of the LORD burned against them, and he left them" (v. 9). God had to straighten out the siblings, punishing Miriam by turning her skin leprous white. That got at the root of Miriam's antagonism, and the racist way she expressed her jealousy.

Miriam's actions and words stirred God's anger, brought His punishment, separated her from His blessing, and slowed the progress of God's people. At Aaron's pleading, Moses humbly asked for her healing. God did heal Miriam—of leprosy, envy, and any prejudice against the Cushite's skin. God wants to heal our hearts of these ills too.

SHARON NORRIS ELLIOTT

When encountering people of another ethnicity, are your actions and reactions motivated by stereotypical views that reveal heart issues God wants to address?

*Lord, show me and others how to not overlook racism;
help me to call it out and examine the motivations around this sin.
Please heal my heart. In Jesus' name, amen.*

 ¹ Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. ² “Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?” they asked. “Hasn’t he also spoken through us?” And the LORD heard this.

³ (Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.)

⁴ At once the LORD said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, “Come out to the tent of meeting, all three of you.” So the three of them went out. ⁵ Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud; he stood at the entrance to the tent and summoned Aaron and Miriam. When the two of them stepped forward, ⁶ he said, “Listen to my words:

“When there is a prophet among you,
I, the LORD, reveal myself to them in visions,
I speak to them in dreams.

⁷ But this is not true of my servant Moses;
he is faithful in all my house.

⁸ With him I speak face to face,
clearly and not in riddles;
he sees the form of the LORD.

Why then were you not afraid
to speak against my servant Moses?”

⁹ The anger of the LORD burned against them, and he left them.

¹⁰ When the cloud lifted from above the tent, Miriam’s skin was leprous—it became as white as snow. Aaron turned toward her and saw that she had a defiling skin disease, ¹¹ and he said to Moses, “Please, my LORD, I ask you not to hold against us the sin we have so foolishly committed. ¹² Do not let her be like a stillborn infant coming from its mother’s womb with its flesh half eaten away.”

¹³ So Moses cried out to the LORD, “Please, God, heal her!”

¹⁴ The LORD replied to Moses, “If her father had spit in her face, would she not have been in disgrace for seven days? Confine her outside the camp for seven days; after that she can be brought back.” ¹⁵ So Miriam was confined outside the camp for seven days, and the people did not move on till she was brought back.

¹⁶ After that, the people left Hazeroth and encamped in the Desert of Paran.

*Then Philip ran up to the chariot
and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet.*

WHEN GOD WHISPERS


People simply desire truth. We have heard about White missionaries who traveled to Africa to evangelize people whom they considered “heathen”—unschooled in the Scriptures or the Christian faith. Yet Africans worshiped God centuries before those missionaries came.

On his return trip after worshiping at the temple, an Ethiopian, who was an important official to the Queen of Ethiopia, carried a scroll of Isaiah’s prophecy (ACTS 8:27). He likely paid a handsome sum to secure the scroll and was studying it. The disciple Philip heard the Lord’s command: “The Spirit told Philip, ‘Go to that chariot and stay near it.’ Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ Philip asked. ‘How can I,’ he said, ‘unless someone explains it to me?’ So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him” (vv. 29–31). Philip explained the truth about Jesus’ suffering and death to redeem all who trust in Him (vv. 32–35). Their encounter soon resulted in the Ethiopian’s request for baptism (v. 39). They listened to God.

As a worshiper of Israel’s God, the Ethiopian had a profound impact on spreading the “good news about Jesus” (v. 35) while His first disciples still walked the earth. The prominent faith in modern-day Ethiopia is Christianity, a testimony that encourages us to listen for God’s voice as we search for truth. DIANE PROCTOR REEDER

**How did Philip and the Ethiopian hear God’s voice?
What do you do to make sure you hear His voice?**

*Lord, I admit that sometimes I hear that quiet, small voice I know
is You, and I am preoccupied with the noise of the world.
Forgive me, help me to listen to You, and give me courage
to obey Your truth.*

 ²⁶ Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” ²⁷ So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”

³⁰ Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.

³¹ “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

³² This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:
“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.

Who can speak of his descendants?

For his life was taken from the earth.”

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” ³⁵ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

³⁶ As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?”

I will save you . . . because you trust in me, declares the LORD.

COURAGE TO TRUST

Reverend C. T. Vivian helped to fire Martin Luther King Jr.'s imagination and activism. As King's lieutenant in nonviolent efforts to register Black voters in Alabama in 1965, Vivian was assaulted by Sheriff Jim Clark, who strongly resisted Blacks' voting rights. Vivian remained resolute in his faith and ministry, continuing justice work until his death at age ninety-five.


When the prophet Jeremiah remained in Jerusalem, speaking God's message during the siege by Babylon, he had help from Ebed-Melek, an African staying at the royal court. Those opposing God's messenger lowered Jeremiah into a muddy cistern (JEREMIAH 38:6). When Ebed-Melek heard and saw the injustices leveled at Jeremiah, he rescued him from those plotting to take the prophet's life. Ebed-Melek courageously sought permission from King Zedekiah to pull Jeremiah out of the cistern (vv. 7–13). Jeremiah later received a word from the Lord that the city would be captured, and he went and spoke God's message to Ebed-Melek: "I will save you; you will not fall by the sword but will escape with your life, because you trust in me, declares the LORD" (39:18).

Ebed-Melek, despite obstacles, acted courageously. Those in any generation can trust in God. Despite strong opposition, C. T. Vivian said of his and others' involvement in the civil rights movement, "But we kept knowing the Scriptures. We kept living by faith . . . You are made by the struggles you choose."

MARCELLA L. CHARLES

**When has your trust in God been severely tested?
Who encouraged you when you faced trials
or difficult circumstances?**

*Lord, may I always place my trust in You,
regardless of the circumstances.*

 ⁵ But the Babylonian army pursued them and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho. They captured him and took him to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon at Riblah in the land of Hamath, where he pronounced sentence on him. ⁶ There at Riblah the king of Babylon slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes and also killed all the nobles of Judah. ⁷ Then he put out Zedekiah's eyes and bound him with bronze shackles to take him to Babylon.

⁸ The Babylonians set fire to the royal palace and the houses of the people and broke down the walls of Jerusalem. ⁹ Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard carried into exile to Babylon the people who remained in the city, along with those who had gone over to him, and the rest of the people. ¹⁰ But Nebuzaradan the commander of the guard left behind in the land of Judah some of the poor people, who owned nothing; and at that time he gave them vineyards and fields.

¹¹ Now Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had given these orders about Jeremiah through Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard: ¹² "Take him and look after him; don't harm him but do for him whatever he asks." ¹³ So Nebuzaradan the commander of the guard, Nebushazban a chief officer, Nergal-Sharezer a high official and all the other officers of the king of Babylon ¹⁴ sent and had Jeremiah taken out of the courtyard of the guard. They turned him over to Gedaliah son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, to take him back to his home. So he remained among his own people.

¹⁵ While Jeremiah had been confined in the courtyard of the guard, the word of the LORD came to him: ¹⁶ "Go and tell Ebed-Melek the Cushite, 'This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: I am about to fulfill my words against this city—words concerning disaster, not prosperity. At that time they will be fulfilled before your eyes. ¹⁷ But I will rescue you on that day, declares the LORD; you will not be given into the hands of those you fear. ¹⁸ I will save you; you will not fall by the sword but will escape with your life, because you trust in me, declares the LORD.' "

And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

TRUE DISCIPLESHIP

The same year that the church I presently pastor was handed over to me, my dad went to be with the Lord. I could not attend his burial to pay him my last respects, and this was devastating for me. Then, four days after the first Sunday morning service at the church, I got a call following our midweek meeting, telling me that my younger brother was killed by armed robbers! The pain of losing my loved ones at this pivotal period in my ministry weighed heavy on me, but God's grace helped me to press on.

God encouraged me by reminding me of Simon of Cyrene, an ancient city in northern Africa. Simon became a significant figure in the event of Christ's crucifixion. Despite the distractions and pains of that horrifying event, Simon served as an epitome of discipleship. As soldiers led Jesus to Golgotha to be crucified, "They met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross" (MATTHEW 27:32).

Jesus said that if anyone would be His disciple, they would have to take up their cross and follow Him (LUKE 14:26-27). As we choose to follow Jesus, He will help us. His grace is sufficient for us to live in the peace and joy found only in Him. His joy fills our hearts! He gives us perfect peace (ISAIAH 26:3).

AYODELE AFUYE

What does it mean to you to be a disciple, and do you trust Jesus as your Source of peace?

Lord Jesus, I choose to follow You. Please, grant me the grace and ability to always see You as Lord and my Source of peace and strength.

*Honor her for all that her hands
have done.*

WHERE HONOR IS DUE

What images cross our minds when we read about the “virtuous woman” in Proverbs 31? Maybe we think of a woman tending to her home and family, and also building a brilliant career. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, known as “Ma Ellen,” is such a virtuous woman. She is also known internationally as Africa’s “Iron Lady,” the first democratically elected female head of state in Africa. She became Liberia’s president in 2005. This woman has been hunted, imprisoned, and exiled. But her honors and awards include the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the United States’ highest civilian decoration, and the Nobel Peace Prize.

Fittingly, President Johnson Sirleaf credits her mother’s courage, work ethic, and “fear of the Lord,” as what empowered her own choices. Honor and praise are intrinsic to wise living, according to God’s principles. Proverbs 31:10–31 tells us to honor the woman who embodies wisdom by submitting all of her life to God and who serves others with her skills. “Honor her for all that her hands have done, and let her works bring her praise” (v. 31).

Pursued as a political threat because of her stand for justice and giving every citizen a voice, and trying to end poverty, Johnson Sirleaf is a global leader in women’s empowerment. Her life highlights how wisdom uplifts character and skills that bring health, security, and fruitfulness inside and outside the home! Wise living restores and rebuilds broken communities, nations, and generations.

TIA SWAIN

What do you find difficult about trusting God for the recognition and rewards that come from living in a way that honors Him?

*Thank You, Lord, for making it clear in Your Word that I’ll be recognized and rewarded for the ways I serve You and others.
Guide me with Your wisdom.*



- 13 She selects wool and flax
and works with eager hands.
- 14 She is like the merchant ships,
bringing her food from afar.
- 15 She gets up while it is still night;
she provides food for her family
and portions for her female servants.
- 16 She considers a field and buys it;
out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.
- 17 She sets about her work vigorously;
her arms are strong for her tasks.
- 18 She sees that her trading is profitable,
and her lamp does not go out at night.
- 19 In her hand she holds the distaff
and grasps the spindle with her fingers.
- 20 She opens her arms to the poor
and extends her hands to the needy.
- 21 When it snows, she has no fear for her household;
for all of them are clothed in scarlet.
- 22 She makes coverings for her bed;
she is clothed in fine linen and purple.
- 24 She makes linen garments and sells them,
and supplies the merchants with sashes.
- 25 She is clothed with strength and dignity;
she can laugh at the days to come.
- 26 She speaks with wisdom,
and faithful instruction is on her tongue.
- 27 She watches over the affairs of her household
and does not eat the bread of idleness.
- 28 Her children arise and call her blessed;
her husband also, and he praises her:
- 29 "Many women do noble things,
but you surpass them all."
- 30 Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting;
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
- 31 Honor her for all that her hands have done,
and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.

*The midwives, however, feared God . . .
they let the boys live.*

LEGACIES OF BOLDNESS

Jo Ann Robinson, a young woman new to Montgomery, Alabama, was verbally attacked by a public bus driver for sitting in the “Whites only” section. It was 1949. Her response? Robinson planned a boycott to end bus segregation in Alabama. When Rosa Parks was arrested in 1955 for refusing to give up her seat to a White rider, Robinson launched those plans in one of the greatest acts of civil disobedience in US history: the Montgomery bus boycott. Both Robinson and Parks had a choice. They could accept degradation, remain silent, complacent, and uncomfortable, or they could act.

During the Israelites’ enslavement in Egypt, two women—Shiphrah and Puah—had a choice to make: obey Pharaoh’s orders and kill Hebrew baby boys or obey God and allow the boys to live. “The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live” (EXODUS 1:17). Some scholars believe this is likely one of the first recorded instances of civil disobedience in history.

I imagine all of these women felt anxious, concerned about the consequences of their choices as they risked their lives for the cause of justice. When we’re fueled by our love and reverence for God and act that out in love for our neighbors and their lives, God blesses our boldness, and He changes our world. God challenges us to choose boldness over complacency and comfort.

YULISE REAVES WATERS

How might the purpose and fulfillment we seek in an unjust situation rest in our boldness and trust in God for the outcome?

God, thank You for your unfailing love. Fill me with that love so that I may choose to stand for You as You did for me on the cross.

Amen.

*Therefore go and make disciples
of all nations.*

COMMISSIONED

George Liele was twenty-three years old when he surrendered to Christ. Not much later, his master, a Baptist minister in Georgia, freed him. Liele became the first acknowledged African American Baptist preacher to slaves in Georgia and South Carolina. But he had to flee the South at his former master's death, to avoid re-enslavement by that former master's descendants. Boarding a ship for Jamaica in 1782 along with his wife and children, Liele became an international missionary. He preached to the enslaved in Jamaica's colonies and thousands of islanders converted to follow Christ. Liele established the Baptist church in the capital of Kingston, and in other neighboring parishes, and extended his mission beyond the island to Nova Scotia and to Sierra Leone.

Liele's lasting influence calls forth to believers to "run and not grow weary" (ISAIAH 40:31), to accomplish God's will that has been graciously entrusted to us in the Great Commission (MATTHEW 28:18–20). To go preach the gospel and to make disciples. Liele did so, influencing individuals and nations with a vision for Black, White, and integrated congregations.

Buried in an unmarked grave in Jamaica, Liele died a free man in Christ. His legacy is his fulfillment of the Great Commission in the United States and the world. As Christ's ambassadors who respond to the Spirit's moving, we can rest assured in God's commission and pursue our own similar assignments in the world.

QUAWANNA N. BANNARBIE

**Where is Jesus calling you to "go" and make disciples?
Whose testimony encourages you to run on?**

*Lord, I accept the commission to go where You lead me.
Show me how to respond to Your Spirit and take part
in the gospel at work in Your world.*



- 25 “To whom will you compare me?
Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One.
- 26 Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens:
Who created all these?
He who brings out the starry host one by one
and calls forth each of them by name.
Because of his great power and mighty strength,
not one of them is missing.
- 27 Why do you complain, Jacob?
Why do you say, Israel,
“My way is hidden from the LORD;
my cause is disregarded by my God”?
- 28 Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.
- 29 He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.
- 30 Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;
- 31 but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.

There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God.

REST FOR EVERY MILE

Discrimination, rejection, and exclusion didn't stop Julia A. J. Foote. One of many Black leaders of faith, she was "hands and feet" for the gospel and justice. This traveling evangelist became the first female deacon in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. By horse, stagecoach, train, boat, and walking, Foote logged more than ten thousand miles from 1840 to 1860, preaching holiness, salvation, and equal rights. She later wrote that her ministry was for all people, but especially for Black people to find salvation and what she called "sweet soul rest."

Hebrews 4 says that this "promise of entering his rest still stands," and "we who have believed enter that rest" (vv. 1, 3). No matter what, our souls can rest in Him. "There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God" (v. 9) here and in eternity. When we are in a season of hard work and feel weary, we can remember that we have a Savior who empathizes with our weakness. God understands when we are tempted to worry or cut corners or do less than our best work.

In these moments, we can go to Him in prayer to "receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (v. 16). He will carry us through. With each mile we go to do His work, He helps us to keep going and assures us of rest in Him.

MONIKA R. A. MILLER

What work issues might you need to take confidently before His throne?

Father of the Sabbath, thank You for leading me to rest.

*I have not stopped
giving thanks for you.*

OUR PRAYERS

The prayers of our elders have sustained the Black family and community throughout history. From crying prayers as Black mothers watched children stolen and sold into slavery, to faith-filled prayers trusting God for safety in an unjust world, every such prayer embodies sacrifice and survival. Our prayers encourage us to survive trouble, to press on victoriously.

The apostle Paul's prayer for the church of Ephesus resonates with these kinds of prayers. He started his prayer, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us" (EPHESIANS 1:3). With thanksgiving, we pray, remembering in prayer both biological and nonbiological children. Like Paul's prayer, we ask God to give each generation "wisdom and revelation" to "know Him better" (v. 17) and to enable us to rise above daily obstacles that threaten our soul. We cry out to God to enlighten our children's hearts to have hope and know "his incomparably great power for us who believe" when all appears to be lost (v. 19).

Just as Paul wanted the Ephesians to know the hope that only God gives, we plead with our Lord to give us His strength to persevere and fulfill the calling He gives to each of us. Paul's and our elders' prayers model to us the need to begin with gratitude to God and to seek His wisdom, knowledge, and strength through prayer.

ROSALYN YILPET

Who prays for you? Whom can you pray for?

*Oh, Lord, hear and answer the prayers of others for me,
and my prayers for others.*

*You intended to harm me,
but God intended it for good.*

GOD HAS A PLAN

In the silent film era, the Pullman porter was often depicted as a bumbling, submissive Black man with little intelligence. That depiction wasn't far from the image George M. Pullman wanted porters to portray when serving wealthy White passengers on his luxury sleeping cars. The shrewd businessman wanted to hire men who would work long hours for low wages in a tough climate, and without complaint. An ex-slave fit the bill.

If life were fair, everyone would always be treated equally and with honor and respect. The Pullman porters would've been paid fair wages and not overworked. If life were fair, Joseph's brothers would not have sold him into slavery (SEE GENESIS 37:27). And we would not have to recount the unfair treatment we've endured at times simply because of the color of our skin or challenges in the family. But God intends to accomplish what is good as He did for Joseph and his brothers and their families (50:20).

God used Joseph's plight to save nations from a famine. He used the Pullman porters to help fuel the civil rights movement and provide Black people with a source of income. Through the porters' experiences, God moved North America toward being a place of freedom for all citizens. When life is unfair and it seems like we're subject to another person's whims, let's remember to always look to God and wait for Him. He has a plan.

JENNIFER LUVERT LEE

**When someone hurts or oppresses you in some way,
how can staying focused on God help you endure?**

Dear God, I'm grateful that nothing surprises You. Thank You for Your purpose and plan for my life that supersedes everything I experience along this journey. In Jesus' name, amen.

*He has filled him with the Spirit of God,
with wisdom, with understanding.*

GOD-GIVEN GIFTS

Henry Ossawa Tanner, the first African American artist known internationally, inspired others by using all of his gifts. Despite overt racism and professional obstacles during the nineteenth century, Tanner didn't let that cripple him from displaying his God-given abilities. Henry's paintings *Resurrection of Lazarus* and *Daniel in the Lion's Den* received international recognition in Paris. His Christian upbringing likely influenced him to paint what he is best known for: biblical scenes.

The Holy Spirit gave skills to chosen servants during the construction of the tabernacle of God "to make artistic designs" (EXODUS 35:32), empowering them to excel in using various materials, in order to complete the assignment God had given them. The Holy Spirit also gave the tabernacle workers—and gives to us—the ability to empower others: "he has given both [Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah] and Oholiab son of Ahisamak, of the tribe of Dan, the ability to teach others" (v. 34). The Holy Spirit continues to equip God's people with gifts to accomplish tasks we're called to perform.

God chose Henry Ossawa Tanner to enrich the world with his artistry and to pass skills on to new generations. Tanner exemplified sharing what God gave to him, including with young African American artists. His life and works encourage us to resist any oppression and discrimination that would keep us from pursuing the use of our gifts while acknowledging our God. ROSALYN YILPET

**Who in your life and community reveals God's artistic gifting?
How can you pray for their encouragement?**

*Holy Spirit, thank You for giving me and others various gifts
to be used for God's glory.*

There are those who turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground.

HOPE FROM HATE

The prospect of hate served as a signal of hope for Fannie Lou Hamer. In 1961, the legendary civil rights activist was sterilized by a White doctor without her consent while undergoing surgery to remove a tumor. Forced sterilization of Black women was rampantly practiced in the United States from 1920 into the twenty-first century. When Hamer discovered this grave injustice had been done to her, she was incensed. However, she understood that hatred is a hindrance. In her iconic speech, “Nobody’s Free Until Everybody’s Free,” Hamer passionately proclaimed the contradiction between hate and her Christian faith. “I feel sorry for anybody that could let hate wrap them up. Ain’t no such thing as I can hate anybody and hope to see God’s face.”


The prophet Amos was acquainted with injustice and proclaimed God’s anger at Israel’s exploitation and neglect of the poor. Amos’ prophetic message of judgment offered hope and healing. He proclaimed, “There are those who turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground” (5:7). Amos challenged his hearers, “Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts. Perhaps the LORD God Almighty will have mercy” (v. 15).

Hatred makes us bitter. While being subjected to the greatest injustice ever, Jesus turned the opportunity to *hate* His enemies into an occasion to *pray for them*. May His merciful example strengthen us, just as He helped Hamer extract her mission of hope despite encounters with hate.

BRANDON CLEAVER

How has the hope of Christ strengthened you during difficult times, helping you handle the hate?

Gracious heavenly Father, thank You for Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross and the examples He gives us to love one’s enemies. Forgive me, Lord, for when hate has ruled my heart. Help me to love my neighbor as myself. In Jesus’ name I pray, amen.

 ⁶ Seek the LORD and live,
or he will sweep through the tribes of Joseph like a fire;
it will devour them,
and Bethel will have no one to quench it.

⁷ There are those who turn justice into bitterness
and cast righteousness to the ground.

⁸ He who made the Pleiades and Orion,
who turns midnight into dawn
and darkens day into night,
who calls for the waters of the sea
and pours them out over the face of the land—
the LORD is his name.

⁹ With a blinding flash he destroys the stronghold
and brings the fortified city to ruin.

¹⁰ There are those who hate the one who upholds justice in court
and detest the one who tells the truth.

¹¹ You levy a straw tax on the poor
and impose a tax on their grain.

Therefore, though you have built stone mansions,
you will not live in them;
though you have planted lush vineyards,
you will not drink their wine.

¹² For I know how many your offenses are
and how great your sins.

There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes
and deprive the poor of justice in the courts.

¹³ Therefore the prudent keep quiet in such times,
for the times are evil.

¹⁴ Seek good, not evil,
that you may live.

Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you,
just as you say he is.

¹⁵ Hate evil, love good;
maintain justice in the courts.

Perhaps the LORD God Almighty will have mercy
on the remnant of Joseph.

*How can we sing the songs of the LORD
while in a foreign land?*

THEN SINGS MY SOUL

I often find myself humming hymns and spirituals that my mama loved. Whenever she sang them, “tingles” tickled my spine. Though I used to feel these songs were too “grown-up” for me to sing, I soon came to realize we’re never too young for the Holy Spirit’s encouragement. Especially when life’s challenges arise, as those challenges are no respecter of age. Composers, lyricists, and singers like Harry Burleigh, Marian Anderson, and Moses Hogan prevailed in singing, even in the darkest of times, giving us a musical inheritance boasting God’s faithfulness.

But the grief and the pain that accompany life’s challenges can render us songless and circumvent the encouragement that worshiping in song brings. Psalm 137 tells how the Israelites felt “songless” during their Babylonian exile. I imagine that stolen Africans felt this way during their grueling enslavement. Yet, these people worshiped God by singing *anyhow*. Their songs chronicle the faithfulness and promises of God and have become threads that connect generations of African Americans inside and outside of the church.

African Americans’ creation and perpetuation of the “songs of Zion” include significant contributions. Whether or not you consider yourself a singer, hold on to these worship songs in your heart. And whenever you feel the urge to hum a hymn or spiritual song, let it ring out from the halls of your heart and be encouraged.

QUANTRILLA ARD

What songs would you include on a playlist to remind yourself of God’s faithfulness? Which song lyrics reflect ideas about God’s written Word?

*Lord, thank You for the songs that bring Your messages of hope to my weary and sometimes broken heart. May challenges I experience motivate me to make a more joyful noise to You.
In Jesus’ name, amen.*

*How good and pleasant it is when
God's people live together in unity!*

TO BE CONTINUED

My joy rises when it's time for Sunday morning worship; my soul desires this togetherness. Whether we're worshipping in the building or online, our church freely responds to the sermon in "call and response." This has been passed down through many generations: the preacher delivers God's Word, and the congregation agrees aloud. The preacher's powerful points connect, and pauses make room for our verbal, nonverbal, and virtual expressions. "Amen!" "Glory!" "Say that!" "Help us, Lord!" responses punctuate and agree with God's Word. Hands raised, literally and virtually, shout *Hallelujah!*

Psalm 133 tells us how God's people united in worship and praise in great festivals in Jerusalem during biblical times. They celebrated God's blessings on their community, and their priests' anointing for service. They sang together, "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard" (vv. 1–2). This psalm may have been written by David when the Israelite tribes, putting differences aside, united with him as their king and worshiped God—together.

Heeding our duty "to keep the unity of the Spirit" is an invaluable principle "to be continued" and passed on. The fruit of the Spirit—especially "the bond of peace"—preserves our divine fellowship (EPHESIANS 4:3). When we assemble in one accord, it paints a compelling illustration that there's only one body and one Spirit.

CHERIE TRAHAN

What does unity in the church look like? How might the reality of this visible unity influence the watching world around us?

*Father, please lead and equip me as I assist with representing
Your plan for oneness within the body of Christ.*

*Even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.*

UPHELD

African American musician and songwriter Thomas Andrew Dorsey felt abandoned by God. Dorsey's wife had died while giving birth to their first son. Soon afterward, this son also died. Having become isolated from everyone, Thomas didn't want to continue to live. One evening, overwhelmed with grief, Dorsey sat at the piano. As he cried to the Lord, he wrote the famous gospel song, "Take My Hand, Precious Lord." These words strengthened and renewed Thomas' faith that, even in death, God still upheld him in His loving hand.

In Psalm 139, David expressed his trust in God's power, presence, and intimate knowledge of him, even though at times he experienced despair. David wanted to run from life and God, but he realized that no one could hide from God. No matter how much we try to isolate ourselves from God or flee His presence—even in darkness and death—God knows us and remains present.

When darkness suppresses us and we can't seem to find our way, God will take hold of our hands and guide us too. In the midst of misery, God uplifted and guided both David and Thomas Dorsey back to Himself. God knows exactly how to turn our darkness to light. His love for us will always outshine any darkness in our lives. And when death and darkness surround us and we struggle, we can remember that God is with us and will keep us. ROSLYN YILPET

How have you seen God turn your dark times into moments of reflection on His presence?

Thank You, God, for always being there for me.

In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

FAITH AND WORKS

F *faith without works is dead* has sadly become the go-to phrase for anyone looking to attain some physical comforts. Want a new car or oversized house? Pray, fast, and hustle, some say. However, when Jesus' brother James wrote this Scripture, that was not the intent. Artemisia Bowden understood the Scripture.

In 1902, the Episcopal Church recruited Bowden to become the principal of St. Philip's Industrial School, for African American Girls, in San Antonio, Texas. Bowden started with six students but by the 1920s had grown the school to more than one hundred. When the church diverted funds to schools educating White students, Bowden kept St. Philip's afloat through fundraising.

"A person who has courage must be full of faith," Artemisia said, and that unwavering belief in God and her love for community propelled her to act and sealed her success.


James wrote, "You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone" (2:24). *Action* flows from all who trust in Christ, and in turn love and serve others. "Without faith it is impossible to please God" (HEBREWS 11:6).

In 1927, St. Philip's became an accredited community college, making Bowden one of few Black female college presidents during the early twentieth century. The college remains, and in 2015, the Episcopal Church named Artemisia a saint. Artemesia Bowden reflects what can happen when we connect faith, self-sacrifice, and God's power.

YA'KE SMITH

What are you asking God to do in your life? Is your request merely for self-edification and gain, or is it to build others up?

God, move on my behalf, but also move me on behalf of others in the process. Don't let me conform to the pattern of this world, a world that moves in selfishness, but give me Your heart of love and self-sacrifice.

 ¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

¹⁸ But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. ¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

²⁰ You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? ²¹ Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. ²³ And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. ²⁴ You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

²⁵ In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? ²⁶ As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Stand firm. Let nothing move you.

ZEAL FOR CHANGE

Known as the “King of Calypso” music and for his roles in movies and on Broadway, Harry Belafonte risked his reputation to raise money for the Freedom Riders initiative in the 1960s. This involved sending people on buses into states that ignored the Supreme Court’s rulings overturning segregation on buses. Belafonte supplied money, knowing the Freedom Riders would be arrested in hostile territory and would have to be bailed out of jail. Belafonte had an uncompromising zeal for African Americans to gain equal treatment. In an interview with the Kunhardt Film Foundation, he stated, “Breaking down institutions of segregation was always part of my big mission.”

Breaking down institutions of idolatry was Elijah’s “big mission.” The prophet was uncompromising in his desire to free his people from the lie that Baal—the false god King Ahab and Queen Jezebel worshiped—was worthy of the worship only the God of Israel deserved but was denied. As Elijah explained to King Ahab, “You have abandoned the LORD’s commands and have followed the Baals” (1 KINGS 18:18). Elijah risked his life to confront the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel.

The tenacity of Elijah, like that of Harry after him, fits the advice offered in 1 Corinthians 15:58: “Stand firm. Let nothing move you.” They didn’t let threats, hostile treatment, or any other obstacles deter them. The Holy Spirit gives us the power to stand firm until change comes.

LINDA WASHINGTON

How has God helped you take a stand in the past? What will you do this week to encourage someone else to stand firm?

Lord, help me to stand firm on Your truth.

 17 When he saw Elijah, he said to him, “Is that you, you troubler of Israel?”

18 “I have not made trouble for Israel,” Elijah replied. “But you and your father’s family have. You have abandoned the LORD’s commands and have followed the Baals. 19 Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.”

20 So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. 21 Elijah went before the people and said, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.”

But the people said nothing.

22 Then Elijah said to them, “I am the only one of the LORD’s prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets.

23 Get two bulls for us. Let Baal’s prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. 24 Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire—he is God.”

Then all the people said, “What you say is good.”

36 At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: “LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. 37 Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.”

38 Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.

39 When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, “The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!”

*Give thanks to the LORD,
for his love endures forever.*

BATTLE PRAISE

Mahalia Jackson achieved unusual success singing gospel during a time of racial inequality in 1955. Mahalia accepted an invitation by Ralph Abernathy and Martin Luther King Jr. to sing at a Montgomery bus boycott rally. She and these leaders knew the odds were overwhelmingly against them in the war for racial equality. The battle could not be won without God. In her memoir, Mahalia recounts how hymns and other praise songs encouraged the hearts of those engaged in struggle: “It has meant so much to me that a great part of the brave fight for freedom down South now is coming from... the hymns and gospel songs people are singing.”


When the combined troops of three nations came against Israel, King Jehoshaphat used praise songs as a battle strategy. Jehoshaphat turned to God, knowing his outnumbered army could not defeat this enemy. Through a prophet, the king learned that standing firm and singing praise was to be Israel’s only response in this war. God would fight for them, but they still had to show up to the battle. The king “appointed men to sing to the LORD . . . as they went out at the head of the army” (2 CHRONICLES 20:21).

Many of us are facing some sort of battle, whether physical, mental, or spiritual. Though the battle rages, praise can be part of our battle strategy. The Lord goes with us in every battle.

LINDA WASHINGTON

What battles are you facing? What past victories has God given you? How will you praise Him?

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your presence. Grant me courage and strength to stand firm in my battles and sing Your praise.

 ² Some people came and told Jehoshaphat, “A vast army is coming against you from Edom, from the other side of the Dead Sea. It is already in Hazezon Tamar” (that is, En Gedi).

³ Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the LORD, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah. ⁴ The people of Judah came together to seek help from the LORD; indeed, they came from every town in Judah to seek him.

⁵ Then Jehoshaphat stood up in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem at the temple of the LORD in the front of the new courtyard . . . ¹³ All the men of Judah, with their wives and children and little ones, stood there before the LORD.

¹⁴ Then the Spirit of the LORD came on Jahaziel son of Zechariah, the son of Benaiah, the son of Jeiel, the son of Mattaniah, a Levite and descendant of Asaph, as he stood in the assembly.

¹⁵ He said: “Listen, King Jehoshaphat and all who live in Judah and Jerusalem! This is what the LORD says to you: ‘Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God’s. ¹⁶ Tomorrow march down against them. They will be climbing up by the Pass of Ziz, and you will find them at the end of the gorge in the Desert of Jeruel. ¹⁷ You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the LORD will give you, Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and the LORD will be with you.’ ”

¹⁸ Jehoshaphat bowed down with his face to the ground, and all the people of Judah and Jerusalem fell down in worship before the LORD. ¹⁹ Then some Levites from the Kohathites and Korahites stood up and praised the LORD, the God of Israel, with a very loud voice.

²⁰ Early in the morning they left for the Desert of Tekoa. As they set out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, “Listen to me, Judah and people of Jerusalem! Have faith in the LORD your God and you will be upheld; have faith in his prophets and you will be successful.”

²¹ After consulting the people, Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the LORD and to praise him for the splendor of his holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying:

“Give thanks to the LORD, for his love endures forever.”

*There are different kinds of gifts,
but the same Spirit.*

ALL OF US

African Diaspora influence reverberates all over the planet. Even the horrid reality of slavery could not quench God, who freely gifted those in Africa and its children in South America, the Caribbean, the Americas, and Europe. The stream of African, Caribbean, and American descent includes brothers James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamund Johnson, composers of the Black national anthem “Lift Every Voice and Sing”; John Russworm, the first US Black newspaper publisher; Lott Carey, a global missionary; Africans educated in historically Black colleges and universities in the US who returned to the continent as change agents; and many others. God has allowed Africans of the diaspora to flourish in their gifts.

First Corinthians 12 breaks down how God freely gives gifts so the church can flourish. No one has every gift; God distributes gifts as He sees fit. “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work” (VV. 4–6).

In every person, God places gifts to work together and bring Him the glory. Scripture reminds each of us that we must rely on Jesus, the head of the church, and work as one: “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (V. 27).

NOEL HUTCHINSON

**How do you see your gifts contributing to the church?
To the world?**

*Lord, may I remember that the gifts You've given to me
are to be used to Your glory and in the service of others.
In Jesus' name, amen.*

*Therefore encourage one another
and build each other up.*

HOW TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Perhaps her knees were shaking—or she felt confident when she rose to deliver her first lecture. It was a spring day in Boston, 1832, when Maria W. Stewart, an essayist and devotional writer, became a public speaker. As a young Black woman, she was one of the first women in US history to give political speeches before mixed audiences and publish her work. Stewart did not begin her political speaking with policy discussions of anti-slavery work, women’s rights, or economic development. She invited her audience to lead by godly example and to grow in “Christian love and unity,” believing unity within the church a foundation for social change.

In tough times, God draws us to Himself and to each other. The apostle Paul reminded the persecuted church at Thessalonica to “encourage one another and build each other up” (1 THESSALONIANS 5:11). Christians have this responsibility today. When the news is grim and the work of racial reconciliation feels hard, God has gifted us to each other to find hope and support. Each of us plays a special part in the work of living in peace (v. 13) and encouraging the disheartened (v. 14).

We have His Spirit to help us “strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else” (v. 15). Whether our knees are shaking or we feel confident, we can make a difference through our words and actions to encourage others.

MONIKA R. A. MILLER

Who might need some building up today? How can you serve someone in need with your time and resources?

*Dear Lord, help me to be a builder and encourager
in Your church today.*

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil.*

KEEPING SIGHT OF THE GOAL

The voices of organizations in the 1960s—the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, the Congress of Racial Equality, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People—were all important to the success of civil rights legislation. Their differing approaches accessed legislation needs for interstate transportation, public accommodations, higher education, and voting rights with the motive of helping all.

One of the apostle Paul's points to the Philippian church was that people see different ways of achieving the same goal, and human frailties can create selfish agendas. From his side of the conversation, it sounded like the congregation was concerned about the many ministers that seemed to compete with Paul. "But what does it matter?" he reasoned. "The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached" (PHILIPPIANS 1:18). He understood that with a variety of people, there was a need for a variety of approaches. For Paul, he wanted to keep sight of the main thing—Christ being preached. At this he rejoiced.

Organizations and leaders sometimes disagree. At the 1963 March on Washington, leaders jockeyed to speak and gain media coverage. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" presentation ended up last. Even in this climate, all kept sight of the goal and focused on what they could agree to for the greater good, creating gains we enjoy today.

NOEL HUTCHINSON

What makes it possible to work with someone whose method or emphasis you disagree with? Why is it important to work together with people who think differently than you?

Almighty God, through the Holy Spirit, show me how I can work with others toward a common goal, even if we disagree on several points. Thank You in advance for making this possible. In Jesus' name, amen.

Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. ¹³ As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴ And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

¹⁵ It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶ The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷ The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. ¹⁸ But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

CHAPTER 2

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶ Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used
to his own advantage;

⁷ rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

⁸ And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

RUNNING THIS RACE

In Jamaica, Toronto, New York, London, and around the world—we waited with anticipation as Usain Bolt walked to the starting line at the Beijing 2008 Olympics for his 100-meter final. Jamaica has always had sprinters who claimed Olympic medals since the 1960s, but never the gold. In Half Way Tree, Kingston, Jamaica’s equivalent of New York’s Times Square, traffic stopped around the jumbotron video along with thousands of pedestrians. As the race started, people blew horns and whistles while others beat pots and pans. When Usain crossed the finish line in victory, pandemonium erupted. Cell phones across the world and social media blew up with messages.

Hebrews 11 describes the great “faith hall of fame,” and Hebrews 12 identifies the “great cloud of witnesses” looking on who surround us. Some of the unnamed people in chapter 11 didn’t get what they hoped for. But the Bible shares that the completion of the faith “race” will be continued—if not finished through us—by the next generations. And those who went before, our “cloud of witnesses,” are cheering us on.

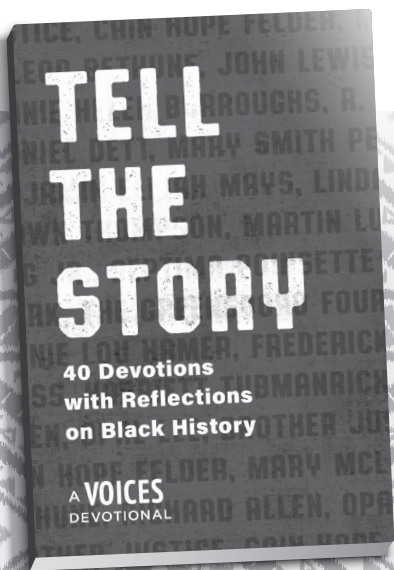
I used to watch the Olympics with my father, hoping someday a Jamaican sprinter would win the gold. I wonder now what my dad and his generation would say if they had lived to see Usain Bolt and fellow Jamaican sprinter Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce, and so many more now taking the gold. I will always remember the cheering of the witnesses.

NOEL HUTCHINSON

What particular faith “race” do you need to run? If you feel hesitant about running that race, how will knowing who’s in your cheering section help you?

Oh, God, let me remember that I run in a relay race that includes those who’ve gone before me and that they cheer for my movement toward victory. In Jesus’ name, amen.

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“STONES NOT ONLY SPEAK; STONES TELL STORIES.
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SILENCE STONES BURIED DEEP BELOW.”

— GEORGIA A. HILL

Be encouraged by this collection of devotions capturing God’s divine interaction in the lives of the people of the African Diaspora, millions of Africans removed from the continent during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. See how although they were scattered across Africa and to the Americas, Caribbean, and Europe, their faith held strong, and their big story proclaims an abiding, powerful relationship with God.

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