

The Perfect Ending

There were great voices in heaven, saying, **The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever** (Revelation 11:15, *KJV*).

Scripture: Revelation 11:14-19

Song: “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”

When I was growing up, many of my favorite movies—*Peter Pan*, *Cinderella*, etc.—clearly depicted the struggle between good and evil. Even as a child, I knew that wrongs should be made right. Happy endings affirmed for me that good was stronger than evil and that justice would win in the end.

As I grew up, I discovered that not all endings are happy ones, and not all injustices are made right. Over the years, I’ve been tempted at times to yield to discouragement. My “child’s heart” still longs to cheer again at the movie’s end—to believe that one day things will be set right. Revelation 11:15 promises exactly that. One day the kingdoms of this fallen world will be transformed, and God will reign forever.

The God who loves us is working to accomplish His purposes, and behind the scenes, He is preparing a new kingdom, one in which the longing of the “child’s heart” in each person will be met with fulfillment.

Father, Your Son taught us to pray, “Thy kingdom come.” Thank You that until that day comes, You hold us securely. In Jesus’ name, amen.

December 30–January 5. **Valerie Bryant Bennett** is a retired teacher living near the Great Smoky Mountains. She enjoys vegetable gardening, tutoring in elementary school, and staying busy with her church family.

Marking Miracles

I will give thanks to you, LORD, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing the praises of your name, O Most High (Psalm 9:1-2).

Scripture: Psalm 9:1-9

Song: “O Praise the Lord, His Deeds Make Known”

The Hebrews gathered stones to commemorate their crossing of the Jordan River into the Holy Land. Generations later, after Samuel led the Israelites in a difficult battle with the Philistines, Scripture says that he too set up a stone in honor of God’s deliverance (1 Samuel 7:12). Samuel named this stone *Ebenezer*, meaning “stone of help.” Throughout the Old Testament, the stone monuments in the land continued to serve as historical reminders of God’s power and help in crises.

Many years ago, I began keeping a list of the “Ebenezers” in my life: the time my car broke down while traveling, and a professional mechanic “just happened” to walk out of the restaurant where I’d stopped; the mysterious scholarship my son never applied for that paid the tuition I couldn’t afford. These and many more are memories I cling to when my faith falters.

In the passage for today, the psalmist gives thanks for God’s wonderful deeds and lists some of them. If we record God’s wonderful deeds from our past, the “Ebenezers” we look back on will strengthen our faith as we begin a new year.

Father, help me to recognize and remember all the times You’ve reached into my life to do something wonderful. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Patterns of Praise

Those who know your name trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you (Psalm 9:10).

Scripture: Psalm 9:10-20

Song: “Great Is Thy Faithfulness”

The book of Psalms would have been something like our hymnal today if we had worshipped in Israel during the days when David was king. Scholars say that David wrote Psalm 9 to a familiar tune of his day. I imagine that people loved to sing this song because, like our best-known hymns, the lyrics reflected their joys, fears, and struggles while affirming their trust in God.

Today’s verse speaks of an intimate knowledge of God. Only truly knowing another person can reveal to us whether it is safe to trust them. David indicates that those who have known God’s name trust Him because He has never forsaken those who seek Him. All of Psalm 9 offers evidence of this. David relates how God has saved him from enemies, acted as a righteous judge, and provided refuge for those who were oppressed. In verse 13, David raises a single ardent plea for protection from those who hate him. Amazingly, even this plea is couched between more verses of praise to God.

If we read the words of our familiar hymns, we will see a similar pattern of petitions for help coupled with refrains of praise. In this new year, may this become our pattern of prayer: may every request we make to God also be lifted in praise to our God, who is always faithful.

Father, I will seek to have my prayer life be as a hymn of love and praise to You. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Immense Patience

I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience (1 Timothy 1:16).

Scripture: 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Song: “I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say”

When my son Ben was about 3 years old, guests had come to our home for a visit. I found it difficult to concentrate on the conversation, given Ben’s frequent interruptions. I finally said to him, “Get a crayon and draw something,” and soon he disappeared. When I next checked on him, to my dismay, he was happily completing artwork on a wall with a red crayon. He was quite proud of his mural, and all I could do was hug him and pray for extreme parent patience.

Before his conversion, the apostle Paul (formerly named Saul) was a religious activist. He was confident that his views were God’s views and that his actions as a persecutor of Christians were affirmed by God. His passionate pursuits resulted in the imprisonment and likely the death of some of Jesus’ followers—people he deemed to be heretics. What a shock it must have been for him to be confronted by Jesus and shown that everything he’d been doing was tragically misguided (Acts 9:1-6).

Today’s verse reveals that after his conversion, Paul considered himself to be the worst of sinners. This led him to conclude that if God had the patience to seek and save Paul, God would be patient with those who would believe in Him in the future. That’s us!

Father, thank You for Your profound love and patience in forgiving even the worst of my sins. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Flight and Fight

Flee from all this [temptation], and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness (1 Timothy 6:11).

Scripture: 1 Timothy 6:11-16

Song: “O Jesus, I Have Promised”

On the first day of school, it's important to make the rules simple and clear for first-graders. “Raise your hand before you speak” and “Be on ‘mouse behavior’ in the halls” are examples of guidelines that helped my students navigate the world around them at school.

Timothy was learning from Paul how to navigate being a leader in the church. In today's passage, Paul gave Timothy three positive directives that would help him in this important role. First, Paul said to *flee* temptation. Playing around the edges of sin is dangerous. Just as the soft edges of a pond can collapse if we linger on them, contemplating sin can undermine our resolve, resulting in disaster. Next, Paul told Timothy to *pursue* those qualities listed in today's verse—the qualities that not only bless our lives but also reflect Jesus to the world. Paul's last directive in today's passage is to *fight*. Like us, Timothy lived in a world where fleeing temptation and pursuing godliness was in conflict with the prevailing culture. Trying to live for God in a world of greed, self-promotion, and immorality involves battling—fighting the good fight of faith (1 Timothy 6:12).

Paul's words encourage us still today to be bold and uncompromising in our spiritual battles (Ephesians 6:10-17), even as we flee sin and pursue righteousness.

Father, help me to flee when temptation knocks, to pursue what is right, and to fight the forces that would undermine my walk with You. In Jesus' name, amen.

David and the Evening News

In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak (Psalm 10:2).

Scripture: Psalm 10:1-11

Song: “God of Grace and God of Glory”

When I read Psalm 10, I feel as though the writer—presumed to be David—and I just watched the same evening newscast together. David seems to describe the stories I’ve just heard, and he cries out to God with the same questions I have.

Almost every night, there is a report of someone’s wicked scheming that overcomes and harms the weak, just as today’s verse talks about. It seems David must have even heard the perpetrators of his day gloat and blaspheme because he says that, in pride, they boast about what they want, and they revile God (Psalm 10:3). David accurately reports, then as now, that these evildoers believe themselves to be invincible, sneering at any authority or opposition (v. 6). David even describes the approach the evil take—they’re like a lion waiting in ambush—as they pursue and kill the helpless and the innocent (vv. 8-9).

Thousands of years ago, a king in ancient Israel witnessed the same kinds of violence and wickedness that we do today. But David didn’t wring his hands in despair or cower in fear. He called out boldly to God. He approached God with candor and faith, and he prayerfully painted a vivid picture of his dilemma. What might happen if we followed his example?

Father, the violence I hear of and see today is distressing. In faith, I earnestly call on You to thwart evil, defend the vulnerable, and protect those who belong to You. In Jesus’ name, amen.

A Prayer for Our Time

Arise, LORD! Lift up your hand, O God. Do not forget the helpless (Psalm 10:12).

Scripture: Psalm 10:12-18

Song: “Who Trusts in God, a Strong Abode”

In the passage we looked at yesterday, David graphically portrays the unpredictable brutal violence occurring against the innocent people of his day. In this second part of the psalm, David fearlessly calls on God to do something about it. David knows and trusts God’s power and sovereignty. He boldly petitions God to lift up His hand against evil, to break the arm of the wicked, and to cause the evildoer to be found out and held accountable.

I remember the first time I read this psalm. Foreign and domestic terrorist activities were taking place in the United States, and many people felt helpless and vulnerable. I found encouragement in David’s prayer, and I began to pray it to God, asking that He expose the plots of those who would harm innocent people. Whenever authorities thwarted the plans of those bent on violence, I would put a check mark next to Psalm 10 in my Bible. I prayed this regularly, and one by one I would hear reports of authorities discovering caches of weapons just before they were used or finding perpetrators in the act of planting bombs. In over 20 years of praying David’s prayer, I have placed and dated 42 check marks in my Bible.

We are not in the hands of fate or chance. We have an all-powerful God who hears the prayers of those who place their trust in Him.

Father, I call on You to root out evil and replace my fear with trust. In Jesus’ name, amen.