

## Expect the Unexpected

**The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom** (Isaiah 35:1).

**Scripture:** Isaiah 35:1-6

**Song:** “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name”

When I was a child, my mother insisted on taking me to the symphony. I fought her the whole week, but that Saturday I was in my seat for the performance. The next two hours were breathtaking. I am not sure exactly what I was expecting, but it wasn't a stage filled with musicians playing such dynamic music on so many different instruments. My heart was captured.

The prophet Isaiah understood that God works in unexpected ways. The imagery of a desert wilderness bursting into bloom shows that God plays by His own rules. Even when things seem impossible to us, God can work miracles in the hearts of His fearful people. Here we find foreshadowing of the unexpected activity of Jesus—who came to minister to the hearts of those living in a spiritual wilderness by opening eyes, unstopping ears, and healing the lame.

Into what “wilderness” do you need God to bring life? Don't resign yourself to the idea that things can't be changed. God can work in our lives in unexpected, surprising ways! If we will invite Him, He will bring healing into our broken places and peace to our souls.

**Father**, surprise my heart with Your unexpected mercy and bring healing to my broken places. In Jesus' name, amen.

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## Faith Is an Action Verb

**Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth** (Psalm 96:1).

**Scripture:** Psalm 96

**Song:** “Onward, Christian Soldiers!”

One day during school lunch, a childhood friend bragged that he was good at sports. When he came out to the park another day to play football, we learned he couldn't throw or catch the ball or run fast enough to keep up. As it turns out, he had the idea that he would be good at sports on a field because he was good at sports on video games!

Living out our faith in God is a series of actions, not just a set of ideas. Today's psalm is filled with action verbs: sing, praise, proclaim, declare, ascribe, worship, tremble, and say. God's people are to do all these because God is great and worthy of our doing them all from the heart. We join all creation in the action of worship. The heavens, earth, seas, fields, forests, and all creation rejoice because of the Lord (Psalm 96:11-13).

We are not called to sit on the sidelines of worship and simply rest in what we know to be true. What we know in our heads must gain strength for expression from our hearts, so that the way we live each day is a song of praise to God. Our relationship with Him is renewed each day. That's reason to respond to the great things He has done in our lives.

**Father,** help me to sing praise and glory to You today in the way I live before You and before others. In Jesus' name, amen.

## Learning to Trust

**You who fear him, trust in the LORD—he is their help and shield** (Psalm 115:11).

**Scripture:** Psalm 115:1-3, 9-18

**Song:** “Standing on the Promises”

The trust fall has become popular for leadership training and team building. The idea is simple: cross your arms, close your eyes, and fall backward trusting your teammates to catch you. The exercise is designed to build trust and help the team work better together.

The nation of Israel had been implored for centuries to learn to place their trust in God. He had shown them consistently that He is the living God and not a lifeless idol. From the Red Sea to the promised land, God had fought for and protected them. Their response should be simple: trust. From the highest leaders to the common people, the nation was called to trust in God. God’s response to that trust would be simple as well: blessings. As the people placed their trust in God, His favor would be on them all and the nation would flourish.

This call is the same for us today. In a world of material idols, God stands alone as the one who can bring true fulfillment and meaning to our lives. We have to make the deliberate choice to trust Him with our entire lives, even to the smallest detail. When we do this, we can trust Him to care for us and to bring His blessing into our lives.

**Father**, as You give me the courage to place my complete trust in You, let Your blessings come to me and to the people I love. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## The Painful Truth

**“Teacher,” [the man] declared, “all these [commands] I have kept since I was a boy” (Mark 10:20).**

**Scripture:** Mark 10:17-22

**Song:** “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”

My youngest daughter is somewhat of a track star, or at least we thought she was. After she easily placed first at the local and state levels in the 100m and 200m races, we took her to compete at the regional level. To our surprise and her dismay, she finished 17th out of 24 racers in the 100m. She was upset, but this experience has motivated her to work harder to improve her form and get faster.

The rich young man was confident in his own righteousness. He asked a question for which he was sure he already knew the answer. Playing along, Jesus affirmed the man’s faithful adherence to the rules, but Jesus exposed something deeper going on in the process. Jesus showed him that living a faithful life for God required more than just following all the rules; it required loving and caring for others with his whole heart.

It’s human nature to compare ourselves to others and see where we stack up. But when we compare our righteousness with Jesus, the sinless Son of God, we realize that we actually fall far short in so many ways. God uses these experiences to open our eyes to ways that we can be more faithful and obedient to His commands.

**Father,** as much as it may hurt, examine my heart and show me areas where I need to repent and make changes to honor You more fully with my life. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Upside Down

**“Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant”** (Mark 10:43).

**Scripture:** Mark 10:42-45

**Song:** “Seek Ye First”

Golf is an interesting sport not only because it is so hard but also because of the way score is kept as play progresses. Unlike most other sports, the point of golf is to actually have the lowest score (without going insane with frustration in order to win the round). As a child, this was so confusing to me because in all other sports, the highest score won. The way of golf seemed illogical.

The leadership model of Jesus stands in stark contrast with that of the Romans, where kings and generals ruled the world. The disciples had not yet come to understand how leadership worked in God’s economy. It must have seemed ridiculous and illogical to the disciples to hear Jesus say that leadership in the kingdom of God would be “upside down”: the last would be first and those who desired to be in power would need to become the servants of all. Experience in the days to come would teach the disciples exactly what Jesus meant.

The leadership structure of the world hasn’t changed much in 2,000 years, and the call of Jesus remains the same too. The church is called to be a countercultural community where the people of God choose to be loving servants bringing the hope of Christ to a world in great need.

**Father**, help me to be a loving servant of my community and my family—seeking not to be most important but to help others see their worth in You. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## The Favor of God

**Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God** (Psalm 146:5).

**Scripture:** Psalm 146

**Song:** “My Jesus, I Love Thee”

I have heard the saying “The only thing certain in life is death and taxes” throughout my adult life. I have also come to think this is true for the world in which we live. But the rest of life often seems unpredictable. Each day is a journey of its own. We often hate uncertainty and try to be in control of our lives—usually by our own strength.

The psalmist sings that it is foolish to place our hope in human beings but “blessed” are those whose hope is in the Lord God (Psalm 146:3, 5). A person who is blessed is one on whom God’s favor rests—a beautiful idea for our days. Some misinterpret God’s favor as material blessings, obedient successful children, or financial security. But these ways of thinking sell God’s power short. He desires to bless us with His presence, with peace that passes human understanding, and with the ability to trust His hand no matter what comes our way.

As followers of Jesus, we eventually come to some understanding that God is truly in control and we are not. It is both foolish and pointless to try to navigate our journey on our own. Let us surrender our desire to control our own lives and yield to His leadership today.

**Father,** I acknowledge today that You are God and I am not. I surrender my life to You and trust You to lead. In Jesus’ name, amen.

## Just One Wish

**“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him. The blind man said, “Rabbi, I want to see” (Mark 10:51).**

**Scripture:** Mark 10:46-52

**Song:** “I Must Tell Jesus”

The classic story of the genie in a bottle is so intriguing. Once freed, the genie grants the finder of the bottle three wishes. That person can wish for unimaginable riches, power, and for their wildest dreams to come true. What if a person could ask God to fulfill one wish? For what should that person ask?

Blind Bartimaeus had possibly been begging on the side of the road since he was a child. Hearing Jesus pass by, Bartimaeus made the first move toward Jesus by shouting out to Him for mercy, even though the crowd berated Bartimaeus for his initiative. But confidently, he shouted all the louder. Then Jesus responded, giving a command (to which Bartimaeus responded) and then asking a question. Bartimaeus didn't have to think about his answer. His faith in Jesus was as obvious as was his need to see.

What are you asking God for? Thankfully, God is not like the genie in the bottle with only a limited amount of power for a certain number of wishes. God loves us and desires for us to bring our needs to Him each day in prayer. Go to Him in bold faith!

**Father,** knowing You are the great physician, I ask you to bring healing in my life today in my area of greatest need. In Jesus' name, amen.