

2022 Southeastern Wisconsin District Convention

Keynote Address: Encourage One Another

Introduction

I was a little stunned that your district praesidium would ask a pharisaical, legalistic, hypocritical government toady, fascist, and heretic to deliver this keynote address. But they did. And here I am.

All those descriptions and titles were used for me in phone calls, social media, and emails during my first year at Martin Luther College as the pandemic troubled our world. I wish I could say that I responded to every such email or phone call with grace and patience, and that I never formed reciprocal snap judgments about my brothers and sisters. But that would be far less than honest.

Of course, it wasn't just at MLC that such pandemic related disagreements caused discord within the flock. During the pandemic, we may all have struggled with the temptation to speak with one another in anger and frustration in our families or church families, in our circuits, conferences, and districts.

Satan was laughing at the havoc this caused among our tiny part of Christ's flock we call the WELS. He loved seeing strained relationships in our families and in our church families and synod.

OK, we might think, that may not have been our finest hour as tempers were short and patience was strained, but that's behind us. Why dredge all of that back up?

There is indeed no benefit in becoming spiritual archeologists digging through every strata of dirt to unearth every disagreement to examine who was right or wrong, wise or foolish. But we also must not confuse a presenting issue with a true diagnosis of what caused the discord. If we are going to grow in what it means, even amidst disagreements, to encourage one another, we need to get past presenting issues to the heart of the matter. Otherwise, in a sinful world and in an imperfect church militant, the next presenting issue will soon come down the road and exploit those same weaknesses.

If you want proof of how important it is to be prepared for the next such divisive issue, I think five letters will do: CUWAA. Many of you may be well aware of what is happening to the flagship university of the Concordia system in our former sister synod. Diversity issues have them in disarray - even going to court against one another. But they need not feel singled out. The upcoming mid-term elections seem poised to make such issues the next red and blue litmus test. Political candidates, often more concerned about stirring up anger in their voter base than finding real answers to challenging issues, are all too willing to permit such issues to become another deeply driven wedge in our country's deepening cultural divide.

Satan is waiting to laugh at Christians all over again if, in the midst of these strong winds of culture, we allow such debates swirling around us to distract us from our primary calling to speak God's saving truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) with one another and with our world. If we are not careful, we can easily conflate lifting high the banner of Jesus with lifting high a political or social cause.

Such challenging situations that can keep us from encouraging one another (and speaking the truth in love to the culture around us) are always going to be swirling around us. What's going on at the heart of all these matters is precisely what Jesus said would happen in these gray and latter days. The love of

most is growing cold (Matthew 24:12). Consider that Jesus spoke those words as warning to his own disciples. The unbelieving world never has had any Christ-like *agape* love to begin with. In Matthew 24, Jesus looks his church of every generation squarely in the eye as he warns us about love growing cold. The stresses and strains of these gray and latter days of the world are always at work to drive us from faith in the Savior by attacking our love for God and neighbor. Here's how Martin Franzmann summed up Jesus' warning: "The bitter disillusionment which comes when men betray their brothers in the faith, the harsh necessity of exposing false prophets and separating the church from them – these things, together with the constant pressure of being hated by all nations, put a strain on Christian love that threatens to destroy it" (***Concordia Self-Study Commentary***, 37).

As Franzmann also notes in this same section, the challenge of Confessional Lutherans seeking to remain faithful to Scripture against a dying world's strong headwinds bring to mind the struggle of the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2. Just like the Christians in Ephesus, the little flock we call WELS has battled hard in God's strength to maintain a clear confession of the truth amidst growing apostasy in the visible church. But in the midst of that noise of battle, the danger is that spiritual PTSD begins to set in. In the fatigue and frustration of battle, we can begin to train our guns on one another. We can become, to quote sainted seminary professor, John Jeske, "straight as a gun barrel and just as cold."

Where Satan undermines love for God (and its inseparable twin fruit of love for neighbor), he is well aware that what he is really attacking is our faith. That's why Satan laughs over the havoc he caused these past couple years in strained relationships among families and church families, in circuits, conferences, districts, and our synod. And while we may think we've begun to heal from all those wounds, Satan hopes we do not too carefully think about what was going on. He hopes the next divisive issue *de jour* leads us to open up even deeper wounds.

The bonds of love that bind us together within the family of faith are a strange paradox. They are strong, sealed by the Spirit in the water of our baptism that united us not only to Jesus but to each other. Yet they are tender at the same time. In our anxious, skeptical, and cynical world, the trust that is foundational for love can quickly begin to crack when our anger gives Satan a foothold (Ephesians 4:7). When cracks in trust develop, and when the damage is left untended, those fault lines can easily be split wide open when the next cultural shockwave comes along.

Encouraging one another – which, yes, does indeed include calling one another to repentance when necessary – is not some fluffy extra for those who can't take their doctrine straight at 100 proof. To dwell together in unity is the fertile soil in which God works his gracious saving plan for us and through us. As Psalm 133 drives home to us: "When brothers live together in unity....there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore" (Psalm 133:1, 3).

Our love for one another suffered some significant wounds these past two years. Now is the time to ponder where we go from here before the next blast of the world's cold and loveless controversies put our love for one another completely in the deep freeze. So, let's explore how to reclaim even more the wonderful gift our Confessions call "the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters" (***The Book of Concord***, Kolb-Wengert, 313:8).

Here's where we're headed. We begin with a survey of three biblical realities which help guard our love by digging down to some root causes of the fear and distrust that eat away at our love. Then we will consider some practical encouragements which can further help us encourage each other. Through all of

this, our prayer will be that God keeps us from giving Satan more reason to laugh as he watches us bite and devour each other. Rather, we will pray, that it is our Father who is laughing through it all as his purpose, not Satan's prevails. And that divine purpose includes this: that we **Encourage One Another**.

Part 1: Fear and Distrust Destroying Biblical Realities

Biblical reality #1: Every detail of world history rests in the hands of the slain Lamb

Sinful wrath and anger are enemies of true encouragement. And behind most anger you will find fear lurking in the heart. As Psalm 37 confirms, so much anger flows from an anxious pondering of how much of life seems far beyond our control. "Do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes. Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret – it leads only to evil" (Psalm 37:7-8). But how hard it is to keep from fretting! To our eyes, life as God intended it is constantly distorted. The more we fret about this inwardly, the more our anger will quickly boil over outwardly. Our anger leads us to want to lash out as we attempt to take matters into our own hands.

But, as always, a proud human lie is lurking in that temptation. It's the arrogant presumption that the future is in our frail hands to begin with. Now, it's certainly true that God calls us to be wise stewards of his gifts to us for the sake of family, society, and country, but we so easily cross the line from trusting stewardship of God-given responsibilities into fearful grabbing at the reins. We climb on the bucking bronco of a disordered world as if somehow, if we ride well enough, we could tame its sinful chaos.

How powerfully God both cuts to the core of that lie and proclaims his comforting truth in the inspired apocalyptic vision of Revelation 5. The beauty of apocalyptic literature, in general, is that it tends to appear at times of great turmoil as it deals honestly – in fantastic pictures - with fearful realities while also providing a new, hopeful vantage point from which to view them. Now, apocalyptic literature, apart from Scripture, is nothing but escapism. But when the Spirit takes pen in hand through human authors to paint apocalyptic visions in Scripture, that is no escapism. It's God himself dealing with a sinful world's fearful turmoil with the fear-calming realities of his Messiah's gracious rule.¹

Such is the humbling and yet astoundingly comforting truth of the apocalyptic vision of Revelation 5. The chapter begins with John seeing a scroll in God the Father's hand. The scroll has writing on both sides, but no one can read it because it is sealed with seven seals. As the chapters that follow make very clear, what is written on that scroll is the world's history from that moment through the Last Day.

¹ Sadly, we often miss the simple and yet powerful comfort of scriptural apocalyptic visions. It happens when we fail to recognize the difference between the Norman Rockwell realism of the typical Epistle section or Gospel narrative and the Claude Monet impressionism of scriptural apocalyptic visions. We foolishly get lost in trying to interpret every fantastic detail of the visions as if they were Norman Rockwell paintings rather than grasping that the Spirit is channeling his inner Claude Monet impressionism to communicate a singular truth. Here is the simple heart of every biblical apocalyptic vision: "The Devil hates us, but he loses; God loves us, and he wins; it isn't even close" (Jeffery Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety*, 179). Sadly, in a world where every "tribe" takes shelter in its own language, some Confessional Lutherans muddy the waters by taking shelter in the allegorical language that is, admittedly, not infrequently found in Luther's own writings (despite how much he sought to wean himself of the practice). But allegory is often nothing more than the lazy Lutheran theologian's path to Christocentricity. For all its pious reflections, allegory often refrains from doing the hard, exegetical work of discovering how each unique biblical text knows how to preach Christ in its own unique way within its own unique context.

At first this humbling and anxiety fueling truth is held before us: no one in heaven, or earth, or under the earth is found who is worthy to open the scroll or even peek inside it! No mere creature of God – even awesome angelic ones – has the wisdom to know the future or the power to guide the world as it hurtles from one turmoil to the next toward its inevitable doom.

But as John begins to weep over troubles human sin has caused but no human strength can cure, suddenly he is told: “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals” (Revelation 5:5). And, as often happens in apocalyptic vision, suddenly the Lion of the tribe of Judah appears as a Lamb that looked as if it had been slain. And as proof not only of his humanity (he is the slain one) but of his deity, suddenly he stands where the Father just had been: at the very center of the throne. The human and yet divine Lion/Lamb takes the scroll and begins to break the seals one by one to reveal what will take place.

Yes, much that is revealed is fearful on its face. This world will convulse mightily as it goes down to its death under a Holy Creator’s curse. The Spirit does not hide that from John or us. But all of this is revealed by the slain and risen Lamb as he breaks the seals one by one. That clues us in to this comforting reality: all of this ends with God’s saving purpose accomplished for his elect because of the Lion/Lamb. That’s why, as the seventh seal is opened, we see before us the uncountable host of God’s elect children from every nation, tribe, people and language standing in triumph before the Lamb (Revelation 7:9). They are safe forever before their Savior’s throne. Not a single one is lost of those whom God sealed as his own in his electing love in Jesus.

For all its awesome wonder, the message of this vision of Revelation is simple. World history until the end of all time rests in the hands of the slain Lamb. It is the fantastic apocalyptic method of painting before us what Paul says in more prosaic and yet still poetic language in Romans 8: “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (32).

The applications are many to help us to gain courage and to die to fear and anxiety (and the anger and bitterness they produce toward God and others). However, since all three biblical realities we are tracing are intimately interlaced, we will explore the next two truths first before making applications.

Biblical reality #2: Our congregations and their leaders rest securely in Jesus’ hands

Knowing that God has the grand narrative of world history all figured out is wonderful, but what about the petite narratives of each day of our lives as individual Christians, as Christian families, and as church families? These more personal concerns can still fill our hearts with fear and anxiety and lead us to the anger and frustration that poison any eagerness to encourage one another.

If we go back four chapters to Revelation 1, there we see that God doesn’t just sweat the big stuff. He is also intimately involved in the dirty, grimy, and sin-infested details of our daily lives.

As this vision opens, it’s important to note where John is and why he’s there. He’s not among the people of God he loved and cared for. He’s on a rocky, God-forsaken outcropping in the Aegean Sea called Patmos. Here Rome banished enemies of the state.

But things weren’t just hard for John but also for the people he loved and served. They were struggling against the same forces of Rome - not to mention hostile Judaism - that were also making their lives uncomfortable, even dangerous and deadly. As we remember that biblical apocalyptic literature does

not sugarcoat the painful realities of life in this fallen world, it's fascinating to note how John was inspired to lead into this vision: "I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus..." (Revelation 1:9). Yes, John is with these words echoing the encouragement of Jesus to his first disciples, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). Yet John does not hide that for this life reigning with Christ in that kingdom means being surrounded by that which brings "suffering" and calls for "patient endurance." Who is equal to facing such things again and again and again?

You are! And the vision tells us how! The Roman empire was able to separate John from the people of God he loved, but they could not separate John or his people from the Jesus who loved them! What's the proof? Suddenly, it became clear that this little island was not God-forsaken at all! Suddenly, there is a voice like a trumpet, like the rushing of many waters, like the merging of all the world's waterfalls. Suddenly, as John turns to look, there before him is the stunning and, at first, fearful vision of one who looked "like a son of man." However, the vision showed clearly this was no mere man. His eyes are blazing fire. His feet glowing bronze. His face shines with the brilliance of the noonday sun.

John's initial reaction – as would also have been ours as sinful creatures - was to fall down as though dead. But that Son of Man touches him with his right hand and speaks these comforting words: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades" (Revelation 1:17-18).

And then, to underline the comfort of what he just said, this life-giving and peace-restoring Jesus takes pains to provide a clear explanation of two elements in the vision. Jesus is walking in amidst seven golden lampstands and is holding seven stars in his hand. As he explains, the seven golden lampstands around him were the seven churches who were the first recipients of this letter. The seven stars were the messengers, the spiritual leaders, of those congregations. What is Jesus doing here but painting with astounding picture language that which he told us so plainly in prose elsewhere. "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20) and "Where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them" (Matthew 18:20). Jesus is intimately and personally caring for his flock.

And for those who are called or appointed to lead God's people, the image of the stars held safely in his right hand provides astounding comfort. Jesus provides special palm-of-the-hand protection for those often the target of Satan's most powerful attacks to give in to fear, anger, distrust, and discouragement. With all of this, God assures all his people, and especially his spiritual leaders, that he is not just concerned about the big picture of world history. He is with us to love and protect in all the details of our lives. In his Church, each of us and all of us are safe and secure. We are the kingdom he loves!

And yes, that isn't just true when things are going well and we are all getting along just fine. This is true when "suffering" and "patient endurance" accompany our reign with him in his kingdom – just as he said it would be this side of heaven. Even then, we have nothing to fear. While there are many applications for encouraging each other, allow one more biblical reality to be interwoven.

Biblical reality #3: Our hope has never been in princes, in mortal men who cannot save

What we are now entering is the area in which any misunderstanding can quickly cause significant confusion that leads to much fear and anger. Confusion here results in a significant amount of biting and devouring, rather than encouraging. And American Christianity is often badly confused right here.

Many of the most heated arguments in our culture right now reveal themselves in the political realm. Often, one “side” in the political debate has no use for the two biblical truths we have just outlined, while the other “side” badly distorts those same teachings. At the risk of oversimplifying, what we often see are two very entrenched enemy forces battling for control in our country. On the one side is a very secular perspective that finds no comfort in the visions of Revelation because they simply do not believe in the Savior who gave those revelations. They do not find any comfort in the promises for this life and eternity in the kingdom of heaven since they do not belong to it. All their hopes – if they even believe in hope of any kind - are situated only in this world. Therefore, they find themselves heatedly invested in the political realm since having the “right” government and the “right” laws (as they perceive it) are the only hope for the world to actually “progress” (as they would define progress). Having put all their eggs in the basket of the kingdom of this world, success in the political realm takes on immense importance. And anyone opposing them will quickly be viewed as the enemy with name-calling rhetoric to match.

What is ironic, is that the other “side” often is making the same mistake, but in the exact opposite direction. Much of American Christianity is millennialistic. They badly confuse the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world. They harbor the utterly unbiblical hope that this world, before the Last Day, will somehow become a place where Christians rule, either before or after Christ visibly returns. Thus, the irony: while they may indeed believe in Jesus, they mistakenly believe the advance of God’s kingdom requires – to a large degree – the controlling of political power. Such millennial thinking discounts what Scripture says about a world inevitably sliding ever deeper into its death spiral until the Last Day. Substituting a theology of glory for a theology of the cross, millennial thinking believes that somehow Christians can avoid the tribulations of this world as they seek to triumph not just by faith but by sight. Refusing to let the glory of our life be hidden with Christ until the Last Day (Colossians 3:3), many Christians are seeking to establish that rule visibly right now.

What does this yield? It yields a form of Christianity that battles for control of the political realm with the same kind of fierce no-holds-barred tenacity as their secularized opponents. Both are sure they are on the “right” side and know what the “right” form of government must be, and their language and rhetoric paints all who disagree with them as their evil enemies. With that much at stake, there is little room for cooperation or compromise or finding anything in one’s opponents points to agree with. Each side engages in the exaggeration of whatever they don’t agree with in their enemy’s agenda (which is almost always everything). And anyone who does not adhere strictly to the “party line” (in either direction) is publicly called out and punished.

Living in the midst of an American Christianity that breathes such a millennialistic theology of glory, it is painfully easy for us to breathe in more of that spirit than we know. Even when a particular political point may be very good and wise, the spirit and vehemence of how points are argued in this slash and burn holy war is already problematic. Sadly, we too can begin to learn this style of angry, rhetorical warfare. In this combat zone, any fellow Christian who disagrees with us - sometimes even in the least point from what is the currently accepted political orthodoxy – can be looked on with suspicion.

That’s why Scripture’s teaching about the two kingdoms must be considered very carefully. So much of the frantic fear of the Christian world around us springs from just this confusion of the two kingdoms. Too many Christians place far too much of their hope in maintaining or gaining control of the branches of government. While we as Lutherans can too easily fall into the opposite ditch of washing our hands of the government or political realm or social square entirely, the general tendency of the Christians of

North America is to lean considerably in the opposite direction. Far too much confidence is placed in gaining and holding governmental power in this fallen world.

Believing that there is so much at stake in the political world, the promises we have just traced in Revelation 5 and Revelation 1 begin to seem very distant and impractical for overcoming “the enemy.” Too easily – if a fellow Christian seems to hold a differing political view – “the enemy” becomes the very people we are meant to encourage as our brothers and sisters. And, those who are fully on the side of “the enemy” are written off as (almost) irredeemable.

What is being badly distorted, if not confused utterly, is that God has placed us simultaneously in two kingdoms. Until heaven, all in whose hearts the Spirit has kindled faith in Jesus are part of the kingdom of heaven (the kingdom of God’s right hand as Luther called it). However, simultaneously, we hold citizenship as part of an earthly kingdom or government (the kingdom of God’s left hand as Luther called it). God established both kingdoms to bring blessings to his creatures in this world.

Let’s begin here with a quick reminder about what is unique about each of the two kingdoms in which we find ourselves. First, let’s consider the beauty of where our true citizenship lies (Philippians 4:1). We entered God’s kingdom when the Spirit gave us a new birth in the washing with water and the Word (Titus 3:5). The sole purpose of this kingdom is to win fallen creatures to repentance for sin and to faith in their eternal salvation. And, while those won to faith still live in this world, the same grace of God that won them to faith also empowers them to live and speak as walking and talking beacons for a just and holy, but also gracious and merciful Creator who redeemed the entire world in his eternal Son.

The tools of this kingdom are the Word and sacraments as God works in human hearts both to create and then maintain repentance from sin and faith in the Savior. The means of grace, the gospel in Word and sacraments, is the only power that can create faith, maintain faith, and empower fruitful lives lived by loved sons and daughters. This kingdom does not seek to work in us the fearful obedience of the slave, but the joyful obedience of the loved son or daughter of the Father.

In this kingdom, only what God calls evil is evil and only what God calls good is good. And the good is not preeminently matters of outward visible things such as food and drink, but of the inward realities of faith, hope and love in which Spirit-tended fruits of faith grow. “The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:7).

And yes, though many who lean toward pietism within Christianity struggle with this reality, where God has not clearly called something sin, there he leaves much up to the spiritual maturity of his children to make wise decisions about what may be good or best at any given place and at any given time. In such things of wisdom, which are not a matter of right and wrong, it is important that no one use their freedom to the harm of their neighbor and, in reverse, that no one pass judgment on their brothers or sisters whose choices of what is good or best in a specific situation may be different from theirs. While we certainly want to help each other hold unswervingly to every article of Christian doctrine that God has established, we work equally hard to make sure we don’t create an article of faith where God has not established one. One side of the challenge makes sure we don’t turn freedom into a license for sin (Jude 4). The other side makes sure we don’t make ourselves and others slaves to outward obedience that is always the beginning of the denial of God’s alone saving grace in Jesus (Galatians 5:1).

But how different is the kingdom of God's left hand! Here the tools are not the means of grace to win hearts, but the force of law (both promised benefits for obedience and threatened judgment on disobedience) to compel and cajole outward behavior for the sake of the physical protection of the citizens of that earthly government (Romans 13). It is all about the outward realities of life and preserving things such as "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Here the primary goal is not right belief but the right outward action that is perceived to be the best benefit for those in that society. Here the arguments are not formed from chapter and verse of the Bible, but the use of reason as it seeks to reflect the law the Creator inscribed on human hearts as that reveals itself through every human conscience.

Now, it is certainly true that in this kingdom of God's left hand, a Christian will have an advantage since their conscience – which in a sinful world is subject to error and misunderstanding under the influence of our self-centered hearts - are informed by the Word of God. But here is what many Christians fail to understand: when operating in the kingdom of God's left hand, it is a dangerous confusion of the two kingdoms to try to take the weapon of the kingdom of God's right hand (the sword of the Spirit) and wield that in public discourse in the public square when seeking to impact society or government.

But why is that? Isn't the Scripture the clearest light found on earth for how God created us to live in his world (Psalm 199:105)? Certainly! But when we as Christians begin to wield the sword of the Spirit in the midst of the work of the kingdom of God's left hand, we quickly confirm in the minds of unbelievers – as well as those who follow a theology of glory – that God gave his Word mostly as a club to coerce proper outward behavior for the sake of promoting some kind of outward kingdom of God. What is quickly lost is that these Scriptures are written not with the purpose of coercing moral behavior but for convincing hearts that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).²

Another misunderstanding is also lurking close to the surface when Christians blur the two kingdoms in which God has placed them. Often Christians can forget that this fallen world is trending inevitably toward ever-increasing wickedness as hardened consciences become increasingly deaf to any sense of the law God wrote on human hearts (Romans 1:18-32). When Christians forget that, they lose sight of the reality that often in the kingdom of God's left hand the best we can hope for is permitting the lesser of two evils for the sake of avoiding even greater evil from breaking out.

That less-than-satisfying reality of government in a fallen world can be seen even in the midst of the very different setting of the theocracy of Israel in Old Testament times. Clearly, what was unique about Israel is that God ruled quite directly in both kingdoms as God sought to preserve not only faith in the promised Messiah but also an outward nation from which the Messiah would be born.³ Yet, even in

² It can often be true that a discussion in the realm of God's left hand kingdom (for example, as a Christian publicly addresses a public school board meeting in their community) can quickly become an opportunity afterwards to witness to the truth of God's right hand kingdom. Others may ask that Christian afterwards for the reason for the hope behind their words. Then very quickly what had begun as a presentation made in the midst of the kingdom of God's left hand kingdom has morphed into an opportunity to speak law and gospel in God's right hand kingdom. That's why the Christian is wise always to stay alert to every opportunity God may give (Colossians 4:5-6).

³ The thoroughly unbiblical notion that the United States is the new Israel that will establish a Christian dominion to which Christ can return, much as Israel was the believing nation from which God brought his Messiah the first time, also helps explain the vehemence and fear with which many Christians fight their political battles in the

Israel, God instructed Moses to allow those who refused to stay faithful to their spouse to write a bill of divorce. What God clearly hated (Malachi 2:16) because of the hardness of heart it revealed (Matthew 19:8), God still had Moses permit outwardly. At least through the written bill of divorce the forsaken spouse would know, officially, that they had been forsaken. One evil was permitted to avoid even greater chaos and confusion caused by hardened hearts.

Such is the reality of how things often work in the kingdom of God's left hand. As we live in the midst of New Testament realities when there is no longer any outwardly governed nation that is "God's people," we should rightly expect that often the best we can achieve is little more than distasteful compromises. One evil is permitted in order to avoid still greater evil.

Does this mean that Lutherans should walk away from outward government as unspiritual? No, that would be the opposite mistake. Maintaining as much outward peace and safety as possible in a society (the essential purpose of government) provides the setting in which the gospel proclamation can thrive (1 Timothy 2:1-4). For that preeminent reason (in addition to simple compassion for their fellow citizens), Christians will want to be engaged in the public square. With sound reasoning – springing from a conscience informed and sensitive to God's revealed Word – we can assist confused consciences to hear again the voice of inscribed law the Creator planted within them.

Yet, at the same time, we must understand that those efforts will always meet with less than satisfying results. The selfish, self-centered, sinful heart of human beings is always trending toward that which, in the final analysis, is "senseless, faithless, heartless, and ruthless" (Romans 1:31). This is often accompanied by fine sounding self-justifying rationalizations that try to make good (love) sound evil and evil (lovelessness) sound good. Often, "their glory is in their shame" (Philippians 3:19).

That's why, although the Christian will seek to defend in the public arena the cause of those who are being unjustly treated by society, they know that they will never end racism or bigotry since such sins dwell naturally in the hearts of us all. That's why, while Christians will seek to have a government and laws that display compassion for the poor, they know, as Jesus has told them, that the poor you will always have with us (Matthew 26:11). Such biblical and sober minded realism helps Christians participate in the secular realm without frantic, utopian, millennial dreams. Reading the book of Ecclesiastes is a powerful tonic for such theology of glory dreams. There the inspired author reminds us in multiple ways that we will never succeed in a fallen world in unbending all that is twisted or filling up all that is lacking (Ecclesiastes 1:15).

Again, this isn't saying that Christians should refrain from politics or political office. This isn't saying Christians should avoid taking part in the discussions in the public square. Jesus has, after all, called us to be "salt" in a decaying world and "light" to a world where consciences are darkened and blind (Matthew 5:13-16). But it is critical that we remember that being "salt" will only slow or delay the decay of a world spiraling down to death and destruction. It will not stop its march toward death. It is important to remember that no matter how much we seek to let the light of a biblically enlightened conscience shine, the unbelieving and wicked world will often choose darkness instead of light (John 3:19). It also means that we remember, when seeking to exert influence in the public square, that we

United States. Multiple prophecies of Old and New Testament are often badly distorted to prop up this part of the millennialistic dream. False doctrine always has consequences, sometimes on a national scale!

choose the proper tool for that task. For that task God has given us the gift of the sound reasoning of an enlightened conscience that in its speaking reflects the law the Creator inscribed within us all.

Is it possible that some degree of misunderstanding of the distinction between the two kingdoms can explain to some degree what has stunted the encouragement that we are called to give to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ? Have we at times forgotten that when reasoning how to most wisely operate in the kingdom of God's left hand, two Christians may disagree about which candidate to support and what public policies are the wisest? Have we forgotten that Christians may not always agree on the best way to operate as salt and light in the midst of that dark and decaying world as they seek to be involved in the matters of the kingdom of God's left hand?

If even in the kingdom of God's right hand (the church) we are wise not to get caught up in disputable matters where God has not told us how we must operate (Romans 14:1), how much more so is that not true when we are operating in the realm of the kingdom of God's left hand! In the current two-party system under which United States Christians live, it is important to remember that no political party can claim to be God's party.⁴ Wherever sinful human beings are operating, there will be no shortage of sinful motives and only thinly veiled pride or greed at work no matter how many times someone on either side throws out a "God bless America!" If, in the kingdom of God's right hand, Paul exhorts Christians who are calling fellow Christians to repentance for what is clearly sin to do so gently (Galatians 6:1), what do you think that says to Christians who disagree with one another in matters of reason and greater or lesser wisdom in the realm of the kingdom of God's left hand?

And now, into this whole mix, bring back the powerful reminders of Revelation chapters 1 and 5. All is not lost if an election goes the "wrong" way (as those on either side of the political war think). The Lion of the tribe of Judah still holds the scroll in his hand. All is not lost if laws we find distasteful and completely immoral are passed. We are still Jesus' dear ones and our task of being salt and light has not changed – although when speaking in the public square as citizens we may have some new places to sharpen our reasonable arguments for when we are out in the world doing some salt-shaking and light-shining. We do not need to wring our hands as if somehow God's plans and purposes have been

⁴ Abortion, unless for preserving the life of the mother, is murder. That is clearly biblical and reflects what God wrote on human hearts about protecting human life. That which encourages or celebrates abortion for any other reason is bold faced wickedness. That may be one of the more notable blind spots for many in one political party in our land. However, the confusion of church and state is one of the more notable blind spots of many in the other political party in our land. That confusion distorts the very purpose for which God sent his Messiah into the world. It forgets that the Savior clearly proclaimed that his kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). May I ask you to ponder how much harm that confusion causes? If the government forgets its role of protecting life, that is a travesty. But we Christians can still live differently as in both left and right hand kingdom opportunities we let our light shine and win hearts to repentance and faith by our confession of the truth. Despite public laws to the contrary, that witness of God's people can still prevent many from ending the lives of their unborn children (and bring the comfort of forgiveness to those who have been deceived by the world's lies). But if Christians forget why they exist as the church of Christ in this world, the work that brings lost souls to their eternal salvation is hindered greatly. The church begins to resemble just another political party vying for earthly power - just as many unbelievers claim it is. If some of my brothers and sisters in the faith think this confusion may, in fact, be the greater travesty, can I fault them if this impacts how they vote? It was just such a concern for this confusion of church and state in one political party that led WELS Lutherans to vote consistently for the "other party" (!) as recently as World War I. In fact, when presented with poor choices in both major parties, WELS Lutherans were not beyond registering a protest vote for socialist candidates! A master's thesis by a teacher in our synod, [The War to End All Germans](#), digs into this reality at some length.

thwarted when it becomes clear that a dead and dying, blind and unbelieving world, is, in fact, what Scripture says it is. Jesus still walks among his lampstands as he guards his Church and enables her to carry out her eternally important mission through it all. And we and our families still live under his perfect protection. There is no changing those realities. That is true even when we find ourselves disheartened by events in the nation in which God has placed us to love it and work for its good.

So, remembering that we do not need to give in to frantic fear like those who think their hope is in the kingdom of God's left hand, we can refuse to give in to anger with God or our fellow Christians, and encouraged by his promises, we encourage one another. Yes, we can even continue to love and encourage our brothers and sisters in Christ who may disagree with us when it comes to what is the wisest path for which to advocate in the realm of the kingdom of God's left hand! We do that because we know this to be true: where it matters for eternity before God, there is neither "Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian⁵, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all" (Colossians 3:11).

Part 2: Practical encouragements flowing from these biblical realities to help us maintain a spirit of encouraging one another

Practical encouragement #1: Pray for one another instead of preying on each other

Scripture is certainly clear on the importance of praying for all people, for kings and all those in authority (1 Timothy 2). But as we focus on encouraging one another as fellow Christians, the topic of this keynote would point us in particular to the importance of praying for our fellow Christians, and, in particular, especially for those fellow Christians within our fellowship with whom we are most inclined to disagree. As we've discussed above, all that threatens to divide us within God's family is still under the gracious rule of our Father and Brother. So why not take it to him who holds all history and each of our lives in his hands? Even when those fellow Christians appear to be disagreeing with you on something established by Scripture, and especially when they are disagreeing with you in a matter God has not cut through (in either of the two kingdoms), it is especially critical to pray for them.

Why is that? First, it is critical because it helps to avoid giving Satan a foothold as we ask our Lord Jesus not to let our anger or bitterness get the better of us (Ephesians 4:26-27). While there is such a thing as righteous wrath over wickedness, it is very difficult for anyone other than God to keep that wrath righteous. Very quickly our anger becomes a tool of the devil to sow even more anger and discord.

So, what happens when we pause to pray for those with whom we disagree? When we pray for our brothers and sisters when we are disagreeing with them, we are by that very prayer standing with them where it matters most, before our Father's throne. As we step before God's throne on behalf of our brother or sister, we find ourselves on their side (even when we cannot, perhaps, agree with them). We are then imitating our great Intercessor rather than imitating the great accuser (Satan).

⁵ The Scythians were considered to be the worst and most brutal "barbarians" even by other "barbarians." Yet, God still rescued at least some of them for his eternal kingdom. Does that not give us something to ponder before we foolishly conclude by someone's outward political leanings who can or cannot be part of the kingdom of God or who does or does not deserve our encouragement?

John Kleinig, in his book *Grace upon Grace*, points out that there is an inverse proportion between praying for one another and living in criticism for one another.

There is, then, an inverse ratio between criticism and intercession in a Christian community. Where people no longer pray for one another, troubles arise and criticism increases in their wake. Compassion diminishes. The Church is torn apart because the climate of criticism and condemnation prevents it from functioning as the body of Christ. But where people readily take up the shortcomings of others by praying for them, the result is growing harmony and increasing communal solidarity. Intercessory prayer builds up people in the Church and encourages them to function properly as the Body of Christ. Satan, therefore, stimulates criticism and condemnation of others, for the best of possible moral and theological reasons, in order to diminish compassion and intercession. That's how he is most able to sabotage the life and work of the Church. (202)

A closely related second blessing of such intercessory prayer for our brother or sister is that it invites us to check our own hearts for where repentance and forgiveness is needed. There, before our Father's throne, we will remember that whatever is wicked in our anger, what Paul calls "anger and disputing" (1 Timothy 2:8), simply is incompatible with humble prayer. Before the throne of God none of us approaches as anything other than a sinner whose only claim to our Father's ear is our Brother's righteousness that covers us. As we pray – and certainly as we are pondering the Word along with our prayer – what will often become evident to us is that any speck in my brother's eye is nothing compared to the big angry and bitter beam lodged squarely in my own (Matthew 7:3-5). That doesn't mean I don't approach my brother about the speck – Jesus acknowledges that is where we still end up – but we learn not to approach our brother or sister from a position of haughty, self-righteous anger (which presumes we are moral superiors approaching moral inferiors) but in humble, patient concern.

A third blessing as we pray for others is that in answer to our prayer for wisdom – to the God who gives generously to all in Jesus without finding fault (James 1:5) – we may soon begin to realize that the one who doesn't "get it" may be us, not our brother or sister. The wisdom God may give us is to see that we have turned our opinion in a disputable matter (in either kingdom) into divine doctrine. We may also be blessed, in answer to our prayers, with the wisdom to ask questions and listen first. The wisdom we may gain as we listen is that we may learn that we aren't as "woke" in the topic under dispute as we presumed ourselves to be.⁶ Some patient listening to our brother or sister may reveal they have, in a disputable matter, made a very wise decision for a setting and context very different from our own.

We may also learn, as God blesses us in answer to our prayer with the wisdom of patient listening, that we have drawn strained conclusions that our brothers or sisters have not drawn as we stretch their arguments or actions to ridiculous ends. Running to our Father to intercede for them can keep us from being so argumentative that we drive them to those very additional conclusions that otherwise would have existed only in our minds. How many times in Church history have those defending the truth a bit too vehemently driven people deeper into their error. We can end up inviting their human pride to defend what they never would have ever defended as we frame their argument as an exaggerated caricature of what they have actually done or said!

⁶ It's not just in social justice issues where those who claim to be "woke" may not be as well-informed as they think they are! We all know how to claim a position of superiority in an issue when that claim is anything but legitimate!

There may be many more benefits in our godly task of encouraging others that praying for them produces. But this much is certain: God's answer to our prayers for them can enable us to approach them with humility not hubris. Having approached our Father in concert with their chief Intercessor, we can more easily avoid becoming their chief accuser (Satan needs no more assistants). That becomes even more important when what we need to voice is a serious spiritual concern about which God has clearly spoken in his Word. Praying for those we seek to encourage can help us avoid acting as if the goal is to prove our superior orthodox credentials rather than to win a brother or sister over from a falsehood or to reconsider whether their position is wise.⁷ In a church body that is rightly thankful for the sound teaching God has allowed to be found within our midst, it's quite easy to slip into the sin of playing "gotcha" with others as we scour their word or actions for the worst possible construction.

Practical encouragement #2: Take the 8th Commandment seriously

Now that we've raised the issue of taking words and actions in the kindest possible way, we've entered the realm of the 8th Commandment and how that governs encouraging one another. Here's a question: have we learned to give a pass to sins of the tongue as if they aren't nearly as serious as other sins? There seems to be frequent silence on our part in preaching and teaching even when a portion of Scripture almost pleads with us to discuss such issues. In a culture where much that is labeled "news" is little more than slander and gossip (slanted either right or left politically depending on the chosen cable news network or social media platform), have we lost the courage to point out that allowing ourselves to imitate slander and innuendo isn't who we are as God's people? It does no good to reach back into history to point out how often full of invective were the words of Luther and other Lutheran fathers. We don't need to be apologists for them when they were tempted to be creatures of their day any more than we should be apologists for ourselves when we are tempted to be creatures of our day.

Jesus provides no such defense for sins of the tongue. "But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken" (Matthew 12:36). And do we even need to add that to say "You fool!" to our brother or sister puts us in danger of the fire of hell (Matthew 5:22)? Notice also in Matthew 5 that Jesus leaves no room for us to argue that "the fool" deserved the name. In fact, the whole section presumes that someone has indeed been acting sinfully who needs to seek reconciliation, and then suddenly suggests that it is the person uttering the word "fool" who needs to seek it!

In a world that is so easily frustrated with all the "idiots" out there, we would do well to guard our hearts and then guard our tongues. When I fall into such thinking, it may be very helpful to realize that, if I looked into a mirror (either God's or the one on my wall will work), it may just be the one I see looking back who is the greatest "idiot" in the matter at hand! This much is true at least: as I marinate in my moodiness I will see in that mirror the one deserving at that moment to be crowned champion of self-righteous anger. Shouldn't it give us pause that, when the Apostle Paul is summing up the wickedness that by nature infects the world, he does not begin with deeds as evidence that they have altogether become worthless? Instead, he begins with words: "Their throats are open graves; their

⁷ Our sainted spiritual father, J.P. Koehler, in his essay *Legalism Among Us*, warned that such "boasting of orthodoxy" is, in fact, a proud confusion of law and gospel. You will find that essay in *The Wauwatosa Theology Volume II*.

tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness” (Romans 3:13-14).

And yes, what Paul says about the physical mouth and tongue is just as real when the tongue-lashing we deliver is virtual. And there is a special challenge here: it is forgetting that at the other end of my digital poisoned pen is not a digital avatar but my very real brother or sister in the faith. Digital forms of communication, as with any gift of God, can be harnessed for good or turned into platforms for what God would call wickedness. Clearly, the digital world offers some big and broadband platforms for the wickedness of our virtual tongues. When feeling particularly incensed by a brother or sister in the days of snail mail, there was a helpful delay in having to type out a letter, find the recipient’s address, address the envelope, find a stamp, and then get the letter to the closest mailbox. That gave us many opportunities to repent of our surging anger and quiet the intensity of our invective – if not silence it altogether. Hitting send after a few minutes of anger oozing from our fingertips into our laptop or smart phone can happen all too quickly! Unfortunately, the wounds caused may heal all too slowly!

And we’ve only briefly touched on the critical matter of taking one another’s words and actions in the kindest possible way rather than jumping to unloving conclusions. Our court system may still attempt to maintain an accused’s presumption of innocence, but our hearts and lips often work in reverse. We can quickly presume our brother or sister to be guilty until they can prove to our satisfaction that they’re innocent. That’s often a formidable challenge since I may have already finished serving as judge, jury, and their reputation’s executioner before they can say a single word in defense. I may even have already convened a digital grand jury: since in the social media echo chamber I can always find like-minded angry individuals who will assure me my anger was justified.

As was mentioned in the introduction, I wish I could say that when people engage in name calling on my phone line or email inbox that I remember that those angry words came from someone who was hurting in ways I might not comprehend. I wish I could say I always searched for the grain – or whole bushel – of truth in what they wrote and was always willing to admit where things could have or should have been different. Unfortunately, this essay is being written by someone for whom the word “fool” too often fits. And I cannot defend myself by saying: “Well, I didn’t fire the first digital shot!”

How thankful we can be that “Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 5:6). All my tongue’s ungodliness is included in the stunning “not guilty” pardon announced over me. No matter how much my tongue has multiplied sin, “where sin increased, grace increased all the more” (Romans 5:20). For this too my – and your – Savior suffered in silence while a wicked world unjustly accused him! There and there alone we are absolved for all the times we wish we had imitated our Savior and held our peace.

Practical encouragement #3: Refuse to allow our country’s red and blue divide to divide us!

Let’s just say it straight out again. There is no one “right way” that every Christian must vote in every election. No political party can lay claim to divine sanction for all its platform and policies. In a sinful world we will often be holding our noses because something smells foul about every candidate in a race. In such races, one brother or sister may lean toward one candidate and another brother or sister may lean toward the other. I dare not allow that to become a wall that hinders the free flow of loving support and encouragement for one another that is essential to the functioning of the body of Christ. Again, if even in the kingdom of God’s right hand (the church), there are non-doctrinal matters about which believers may not agree about the wisest path, how much more true is that in the kingdom of

God's left hand where God has left so much to reason and conscience! If we do not remind ourselves of this regularly, the danger is great that the red and blue divide of our country becomes a source of genuine offense – of stumbling in the faith – as Christians take sides within their congregations.

And allow a special appeal to my brothers and sisters in public ministry. There are many places in the public ministry that call for public ministers to wisely and lovingly refrain from some things that would otherwise be free to them in the royal priesthood of all believers (1 Corinthians 8:13). Being evidently partisan in our politics either in face to face conversation or in the realm of social media would seem to be one of those areas where we would be wise to refrain from the exercise of our freedom.

The reasons are multiple! As we have addressed elsewhere, the influence of the Evangelical world, which often is unafraid to baptize one candidate or another as “divinely approved,” impacts our own people as well. The belief that there is only one “right way” to view every and any issue and only one party with official heavenly sanction is already out there. For us in positions of leadership, we can easily give the impression that any “good Christian” would follow our lead. Some may blindly follow because their pastor or teacher said it. Or, just as dangerous, others may no longer be able to hear us as we proclaim the still small voice of the gospel because our political bias is ringing loudly in their ears.

Second, it is not only a source of potential offense and confusion within the church but also outside the church. If I wear my political preferences on my sleeve or on social media, we are easily sending not-so-subtle signals to the unchurched in our web of influence that if they disagree with us politically they may not be so welcome in our church or school. That, of course, would be antithetical to the very reason we entered ministry. But the opposite challenge is also present: we can begin to attract others to church because they agree with us politically, as our church and school begins to resemble a *de facto* caucus for one political party. The confusion of the two kingdoms in all of this is profound.

Allow me to put this another way. If we do not avoid wearing our politics on our sleeves, aren't we in danger of fostering another form of modern day phariseeism? Especially on the day's issues in the public square about which we feel the strongest, do those on the other side of that issue get the impression from us that we don't even want them around? Jesus never supported tax collectors or prostitutes in their pursuit of dishonesty or immorality. But, unlike the Pharisees, he never shunned their company nor gave the impression such “sinners” were beneath his concern. Jesus simply spoke honestly to all “sinners” about repentance and forgiveness. He did not lead a social crusade to end tax collector dishonesty or campaign for clearing the street corners of all prostitutes. Instead, those sinners were drawn to him because, unlike the Pharisees, they sensed he loved them and did not write them off. If that is not the inviting stance we have toward those we are tempted to speak of with disdain as “sinners,” how might that become more true about us? We do not want push away from our proclamation of grace those who need to hear of repentance and forgiveness just as we do. Does the scope of our encouraging one another reach that “far”? Jesus' did.

Conclusion

My father was a rather intense individual. He dealt with most things with a strong degree of seriousness (no doubt brought on by the rebellious nature of his youngest son). But I remember fondly those evenings when my parents' good friends were at our house. Do you know what I remember most about those evenings? It was the laughter that would rise up from the front room to my bedroom. Do you

know why I loved to hear that even when it woke me up? It calmed me to know that things must not be so bad for my family. Apparently, the many failings of their youngest had not turned all prospects dark!

In the midst of all the machinations of the devil and his kingdom of the air (Ephesians 2:2), there is a sound that comes down from heaven that I find very comforting. It is my heavenly Father's laughter (Psalm 37:13). No matter how dim and discouraging life can seem in this dark and dying world, that laughter speaks of a comforting reality. Nothing and no one can successfully overcome his rule and the rule of his Messiah whom he has forever installed on his throne (Psalm 2:4-6).

Yes, my Father's wrath – and the wrath of the Lamb (Psalm 2:12) - on the Last Day will be terrible against any who ended their time of grace opposing him. But until then, it greatly comforts me to hear my heavenly Father laugh at those who seek – vainly – to overthrow him and my dear Savior. In the midst of all the sin of this confused and confusing world, I find that laughter immensely comforting. It reminds me of the reality that God has long ago known what he would do to accomplish his will, to keep his promises, and to bring his eternal kingdom to its victorious end. And I can laugh too, because he has, in spectacular and surprising grace, included me in his plans. I find that very encouraging. I believe God uses his laughter to help keep my love from growing cold by being buried under an avalanche of anger, fear, and distrust amidst so much that seems to be going wrong.

But I am not alone in needing that encouragement. And so, when my heavenly Father has tickled me again with his gracious and gentle promises to get me to laugh and ruin another childish tantrum, he then reminds me I have another task to fulfill. It is to encourage my brothers and sisters in Christ – who also are under siege from the anger, fear, and distrust their hearts are feeling. And yes, it may be most important for me to be just such an encourager to my brothers and sisters I may be least likely to encourage on my own. He calls me to help them to pause to listen to their Father laughing as well. He calls me to help them to realize that their Father's laughter springs from the reality that all his good promises remain secure and faithful. He longs for my brothers and sisters to remember that their Father's laughter signals that all their fears, anger, and distrust, can also give way to laughter. It will all be OK. In fact, it already is. That will be very evident when this world as we know it comes to its end.

In that hope, with the laughter of our Father who loves us in Jesus putting a smile on our hearts, we learn how to encourage one another come what may. No matter what the mid-term elections bring, or whether the war in Ukraine calms down or spreads, or whether inflation continues to spiral upward or a recession brings it to painful end, or whether a new pandemic comes along: our source of encouragement is unchanging. And the more we remember that, the more we learn what it means to keep on encouraging one another rather than biting and devouring each other as the fearful, angry and cynical unbelieving world does. Even when the smile cannot be found on our face, or when the laughter of our hearts is still tinged with sadness, we still have a reason to be encouraged, and to encourage one another. Yes, even in the midst of the increase of wickedness, our love – and our encouragement – does not need to grow cold. This is our Father's world. And no one can take the laughter of the victory of his Son from him...or from us. In that certainty of gracious and eternal victory, my brothers and sisters: Encourage One Another!

Rich Gurgel, New Ulm, Minnesota, May 2022

Keynote Discussion Guide

1. Take three minutes to read Psalm 37 below. As you read, ponder this question:

Which of God's promises in this psalm are most helpful for encouraging one another to live in quiet trust rather than fearful anger when evil seems to be prevailing?

2. Jesus never condoned what was sinful, yet, in how he went about his ministry, he did not drive away "sinners" whom many of the "pious" in Judaism had completely written off.

What can we learn from him as we encourage one another to speak the truth in love to a culture greatly confused about God's beautiful gift of creating us male and female? How can helping one another to keep a clear distinction between the two kingdoms also help here as we seek to be salt and light in our culture?

3. What did you find most helpful in the keynote address? What questions do you have?

Psalm 37 (NIV)

- ¹ Do not fret because of those who are evil
or be envious of those who do wrong;
- ² for like the grass they will soon wither,
like green plants they will soon die away.
- ³ Trust in the LORD and do good;
dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.
- ⁴ Take delight in the LORD,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.
- ⁵ Commit your way to the LORD;
trust in him and he will do this:
- ⁶ He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn,
your vindication like the noonday sun.
- ⁷ Be still before the LORD
and wait patiently for him;
do not fret when people succeed in their ways,
when they carry out their wicked schemes.
- ⁸ Refrain from anger and turn from wrath;
do not fret—it leads only to evil.
- ⁹ For those who are evil will be destroyed,
but those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land.

- ¹⁰ A little while, and the wicked will be no more;
though you look for them, they will not be found.
- ¹¹ But the meek will inherit the land
and enjoy peace and prosperity.
- ¹² The wicked plot against the righteous
and gnash their teeth at them;
- ¹³ but the Lord laughs at the wicked,
for he knows their day is coming.
- ¹⁴ The wicked draw the sword
and bend the bow
to bring down the poor and needy,
to slay those whose ways are upright.
- ¹⁵ But their swords will pierce their own hearts,
and their bows will be broken.
- ¹⁶ Better the little that the righteous have
than the wealth of many wicked;
- ¹⁷ for the power of the wicked will be broken,
but the LORD upholds the righteous.
- ¹⁸ The blameless spend their days under the LORD's care,
and their inheritance will endure forever.
- ¹⁹ In times of disaster they will not wither;
in days of famine they will enjoy plenty.
- ²⁰ But the wicked will perish:
Though the LORD's enemies are like the flowers of the field,
they will be consumed, they will go up in smoke.
- ²¹ The wicked borrow and do not repay,
but the righteous give generously;
- ²² those the LORD blesses will inherit the land,
but those he curses will be destroyed.
- ²³ The LORD makes firm the steps
of the one who delights in him;
- ²⁴ though he may stumble, he will not fall,
for the LORD upholds him with his hand.
- ²⁵ I was young and now I am old,
yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken
or their children begging bread.

²⁶ They are always generous and lend freely;
their children will be a blessing.

²⁷ Turn from evil and do good;
then you will dwell in the land forever.

²⁸ For the LORD loves the just
and will not forsake his faithful ones.

Wrongdoers will be completely destroyed;
the offspring of the wicked will perish.

²⁹ The righteous will inherit the land
and dwell in it forever.

³⁰ The mouths of the righteous utter wisdom,
and their tongues speak what is just.

³¹ The law of their God is in their hearts;
their feet do not slip.

³² The wicked lie in wait for the righteous,
intent on putting them to death;

³³ but the LORD will not leave them in the power of the wicked
or let them be condemned when brought to trial.

³⁴ Hope in the LORD
and keep his way.

He will exalt you to inherit the land;
when the wicked are destroyed, you will see it.

³⁵ I have seen a wicked and ruthless man
flourishing like a luxuriant native tree,

³⁶ but he soon passed away and was no more;
though I looked for him, he could not be found.

³⁷ Consider the blameless, observe the upright;
a future awaits those who seek peace.

³⁸ But all sinners will be destroyed;
there will be no future for the wicked.

³⁹ The salvation of the righteous comes from the LORD;
he is their stronghold in time of trouble.

⁴⁰ The LORD helps them and delivers them;
he delivers them from the wicked and saves them,
because they take refuge in him.

