

TODAY

The Family Altar

May 2001

June 2001



“A Spirit-Directed People”
Rev. Bert DeJong



“A Majestic Creation”
Rev. Bill Zeilstra

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A MAJESTIC CREATION

REV. BILL ZEILSTRA
PELLA, IOWA

To sense the impact of God's Word, we do well to spend some time outside. June is a good month to do that and to take time to observe what the heavens declare. This month we focus on many of the Bible's references to what we see in the skies above so that we can better reflect on what God has done, is doing, and promises yet to do.

May we see how great God is and how glorious God's creation is. "O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (Psalm 8:1, 9). May we also become more confident that God directs all things for his good purpose and intends for us to enjoy this glory in Christ. "For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:16-17).

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CONSIDER THE HEAVENS

You have set your glory above the heavens.

Psalm 8:1

I often hear about the fond memories people have of relaxing and cooling off after a long, hot day of chores and play. And I usually ask, “How did you do that?” The answer: “We’d lie down on the grass at night and watch for shooting stars. That was the best time!”

Have you ever done that? Many of us have, and we enjoy remembering it—and doing it again. When we look at the night sky, how often do we realize that we are seeing something of the majesty and glory of God? It’s fitting that children often love to do this. God ordains praise from children. They take in something of the wonder of God’s own marvelous imagination. And such joy and love of God’s glory is so powerful that it silences the enemies of the Lord and of his people!

From June through September in the night sky we in the northern hemisphere can see some of the grandest sights of all: the Milky Way galaxy wheeling overhead with its shining clouds, clusters, and stars of all varieties. As God’s glory is wonderfully displayed for us, let us “consider the heavens” and reflect thoughtfully on the God who has made this world. Surely when we give God’s handiwork our focused attention, we will join with the psalmist in praise: “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth”—and sky!

PRAYER

On this day, Father, and this night, let us look for your glory and exult in it. May we observe with awe each day and night what you have made for us to see. In Jesus, Amen.

THE STUFF WE'RE MADE OF

What is man that you are mindful of him . . . ?

Psalm 8:4

With the psalmist we look up in amazement, and soon we are wondering about ourselves. Seeing the moon and stars, so carefully set in place, makes us wonder what we are that God cares so much for us.

What are we? Science agrees that we are made of the “dust-stuff” of the earth. Astronomers reason that this dust is from the explosions of stars, so they teach that we’re ultimately made of “star-stuff.” But surely the thing that sets humans apart from everything else created is that God has breathed into us the spirit of life. As a result, we are made in the image of God.

Our relationship with God, however, has been ruined through our deep rebellion against God. The mystery can hardly be understood, though it resides within our hearts; our sin binds us powerfully to its afflictions. Because we’re trapped in this situation that brings destruction on all God has made, we need a Savior to change what we’re made of.

The resurrected Jesus breathes new life into all believers, giving us again the Spirit of life. Through Jesus, God has again given “everything we need for life and godliness”; through this rebirth we may again “participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires” (2 Peter 1:3-4). Earth-stuff, star-stuff, or God-stuff—what are you made of?

PRAYER

Dear God, as we praise you that we are wonderfully made, we seek your Spirit by whom alone we can come to true life in your creation. Have mercy on us, we pray. In Jesus, Amen.

DREAMS, PROPHECY, AND A BLOODY MOON

“I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below” Acts 2:19

Today the church celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus’ followers. That day was filled with unusual things: a violent wind, the appearance of flames, and foreign visitors to Jerusalem hearing the gospel in their own language. To explain these things, Peter points to a prophecy of Joel.

The prophet Joel told of a day when God’s influence would flow free of the obstacles of human stubbornness and disobedience. There would be signs that everyone was filled with God’s Spirit: dreams and visions by men young and old, prophecies by men and women, and wonders in the heavens: a dark sun and a bloody moon.

These wonders in the heavens may well be solar and lunar eclipses. Eclipses give the world a different tint and give us a weird sensation. Animals become confused, and humans grow reflective. Joel, and now Peter, may be evoking memories of such unsettled feelings to explain the midday darkness of Jesus’ death and the fire of Pentecost. The sun and moon are signs of God’s favor. When they change their appearance, we quake with fear, excitement, and wonder.

With the Spirit’s coming we know that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” So each day in this changing world we do well to call on the Lord, sure of our salvation if we believe in Jesus!

PRAYER

God of grace, let us see your mercy in the coming of your Spirit, and let us respond with new hearts of repentance and joy! In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

NAMING THE STARS

He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name. Psalm 147:4

Just think—God numbers the stars and calls them by name. Our God is great!

Have you ever tried to count the stars? On a dark, clear night, you may be able to look around and see more than two thousand stars! One of my star atlases cites over 330,000! With satellites and computers, astronomers have mapped more than 526 million! Mapping, naming, and counting the stars has been their patient work for thousands of years. Arabic, Greek, and Latin names as well as letters and numbers reveal the variety of cultures that have been naming the stars, and astronomers aren't done yet. If someone tries to sell you a place on a name-list, don't buy it; their list isn't official. One of the harder working scientific committees selects the names for everything in the sky: it's not easy!

Now imagine God counting the stars. More than that, imagine God calling the stars by name! Even astronomers have difficulty remembering more than a few dozen names. But God knows them all. Each star has a place in God's work of revealing his glory. God understands everything about the universe he has made—and this means God understands everything about us too. God knows and calls each one of us by name. Surely God loves us beyond our imagining! The Lord of all is our heavenly Father!

PRAYER

It's hard to believe, Father, that you know us all by name and guide us with a Father's love. But bring us to believe this truth and to peacefully be glad in it. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE REALLY GREAT SHEPHERD

He gathers the lambs in his arms . . . Who has . . .
marked off the heavens? Isaiah 40:11-12

The Bible's done it again. It describes our God as bringing the most gentle manner and tender approach to our troubles and needs. And this same God is greater than we can imagine: who but God has measured the waters or the heavens?

Astronomers are preoccupied with measuring the universe. What a goal! They proceed in stages: measuring to the moon, the planets, the sun, the stars, and then the galaxies. It's quite a ladder to climb! Then they retrace their steps, correcting mistakes and trying to be sure of their results. They're not done yet—and likely never will be! The mathematical and observational reasoning they use is too complicated for most of us. But we enjoy pictures and telescopes. We're content to know that the world is a big place! God alone knows how big.

And God is not only the Creator and Sustainer of this universe; our Lord is also tender toward his creation. God embraces the weak and carries the exhausted. In limitless power displayed throughout the universe, God also directs us in quiet, tender ways to know him.

So when we learn about God, we do well to ask, "How great is the Lord?" And better yet: "How gently does the Lord tend us?" And in Christ we aspire to imitate our God so that no matter how much power we have, we can also pursue tenderness with each other.

PRAYER

Father, enlarge our minds to see your tremendous greatness, and open our hearts to sense your gentle, compassionate nearness. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

THE GLORY OF FINDING THINGS OUT

It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings. Proverbs 25:2

I grew up poring over each issue of *National Geographic*, amazed at what was in the vast oceans, towering mountains, verdant forests, rich fields. There's a joy in finding things out, seeing how water freezes, discovering how molecules stick together, figuring how light bounces. Looking up at the sky, we wonder how the stars shine. And why does the moon go round and round? When we study closely, we get two great bonuses: we get some answers, and we get more questions!

It's all from God, of course. It's part of the glory of the hide-and-seek dynamics between God and humanity. When we have to do homework assignments from school, we might at times lose our sense of the joy of discovery. But such exercises are only the admission fee to something wonderful that lasts forever.

As in Solomon's day, only governments now seem to be able to afford the cost of cutting-edge research. Still, there's room for the *amateur* (which means "one who loves")—at least in astronomy, in which backyard enthusiasts can track the stars looking for stellar explosions.

Where have you found some hidden glory of God? The best fun and highest glee, of course, comes from discovering Jesus Christ, the hidden glory of God. That's the best discovery of all! And the fun of exploring Jesus' glory has barely begun. Will you join in today?

PRAYER

Thank you, God, for making learning fun. The joy of discovery is such a gift! Show us more today as we search out more of your glory, that we may praise you in awe. In Jesus, Amen.

REASON FOR JOY IN MISERY

He is the Maker of the Bear and Orion, the Pleiades
and the constellations of the south. Job 9:9

Let's get specific. The Bear is the Big Dipper; you'll find it overhead just after dark tonight in the northern hemisphere. Orion can be seen in early evening in the winter months, and it has more bright stars than any other constellation. The Pleiades, making its appearance in early winter, looks like a tiny dipper, so small that it can be covered with a finger-tip at arm's length.

The important thing to know from our Bible readings today is that when Job's suffering was at its worst, he still reflected on God's power. Job mentions several constellations and concludes that God is too powerful and great to listen to his complaints. What a disappointment! But later it's God who does the talking. And God declares to Job, in effect, "You don't know what you're saying! Look at this creation—I know it in every detail!"

The God who knows how to create and carefully tend this world surely knows how to bring justice and how to save what is ruined. The God who made this beautiful world with such power and complex wisdom will surely deliver it from evil. The angels sang for joy at its making, and they will sing again at its re-creation.

When Job hears the Lord, he realizes that in his misery he did not know what he was talking about. Are we impressed with the powerful and beautiful world God has made? And are we moved to trust him always?

PRAYER

As you made the world, Father, by your power bring us to believe that you can also save it—and that in Christ you also save us. In his name we pray. Amen.

THE GOVERNORS OF TIME

God made . . . the greater light to govern the day and
the lesser light to govern the night. Genesis 1:16

When I served a church in California, I traveled with our church's boys' club to the Sierra Mountains. We camped at four thousand feet and witnessed a beautiful evening under the stars. After some time had passed by, I realized with surprise that there was no moon! The stars and Milky Way were so bright that we didn't need any flashlights! Then I wondered, perhaps needlessly, "What would we do without lights?!"

God made the sun and moon so that our time would be governed by greater and lesser lights. Time would not flow by us unmarked and poorly measured. Instead, we would easily be able to tell the passing of time, living according to a rhythm set by God. The day is marked by the sun, and the night by the moon. And the moon's phases mark each month. Our passing through time is thus marked and governed.

Why is this so? Because our existence is timed. For this reason we need to learn about our times if we are to live well. "Timing is everything," says a modern proverb. Too soon, and not all is ready. Too late, and all may be lost. Measuring time is a complex science, but the most important measurements of time are spiritual, and everyone is responsible for them. Thank God that our Lord came in the fullness of time so that today is the day of salvation! (See 2 Corinthians 6:2; Galatians 4:4.)

PRAYER

During this day, Father, help me to see time as your precious gift. "Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12). In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE EXUBERANCE OF THE SUN

We . . . are being transformed into his likeness
with ever-increasing glory 2 Corinthians 3:18

The heavens are not silent but never stop declaring the glory of God. All we need to do is listen.

In our reading for today the psalmist focuses on the sun. When astronomers look at the sun, they use special filters to protect their eyes and to see more. And what they see are marvels unsuspected before the invention of the telescope. They see a boiling mass of nuclear fire, exploding with such tremendous force that the earth and all human achievement seem trivial. Astronomers hear the sun speaking the language of science.

We also listen, however, with the heart. Somehow the psalmist was aware of the sheer power of the sun. Moreover, he saw in that power not something threatening but something as joyful and exuberant as a bridegroom or a runner—full of life and gladly exulting in its God-given power and glory.

Such is the glory of God. The heavens declare it without a moment's rest. Can you see that glory? Can you hear it? As the apostle Paul declares, believers in Jesus also possess a glory that is ever-increasing as they become more and more like him (2 Corinthians 3:18). The glory of God is in the heavens above and in the hearts of believers who walk together in the way of Christ. Do we see that glory? Is it tied into our daily living? May today be a day of glorious living for all of us.

PRAYER

Bring your glory into our lives, dear God,
that we may reflect truly the glory that sur-
rounds your presence. May others see Jesus
in us today. In his name, Amen.

THE JOY OF GOD'S LAW

The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart.
Psalm 19:8

The glory of God in the heavens follows the laws of God. Astronomy focuses our attention upon the skies and helps us to understand these laws. As the heavens are governed by laws, so too human life under the heavens moves according to the laws of God. The stars can do nothing but obey God's laws. Men and women and even children, however, have found not only that we can violate God's laws but also that we can't keep from doing so. As a result, we suffer the consequences that come from living unnaturally: the continual breaking of God's laws brings only misery.

But God has taken pity on us. Through his Word, God's law comes to us to teach us the right way, the living way. By God's law the soul is revived and made wise, the eyes are made to see, and the tongue can again taste sweetness. Is anything more precious than God's law and God's way of life? The law gives life stability. It offers protection and makes room for confidence.

But the law also exposes our flaws and faults. These sins and bondage hold a power over us, dooming us to a downward spiral of disobedience and destruction. So we look to the new Word, Jesus Christ, by whom the law comes to live within us (Jeremiah 31:33), to guide our steps and our thinking each day. May your walk this day be in the light of this life.

PRAYER

Almighty God, as we see your laws, we are filled with joy and wonder. Forgive our faults, and make us blameless in your sight in all we think, do, and say. In Jesus, Amen.

THE FULLNESS OF GOD'S PROMISE

“Look up at the heavens and count the stars”

Genesis 15:5

Have you ever been to a star party? It's a party of amateur astronomers who meet at night far away from city lights so they can see the faintest stars possible. They compare telescopes, look for galaxies, and take stunning pictures. No lights are allowed. Sometimes more than 12,000 stars are visible to the naked eye.

A common experience of newcomers is to enjoy an utterly transparent sky, and then notice with annoyance some bright clouds rolling in from the eastern horizon. They can hardly believe it when they're told that this is actually the center of our galaxy wheeling in with the constellations Sagittarius and Scorpio.

When God led Abram to look up and count the stars, no doubt he also saw thousands of them, most of which were so dim that they blended together and made their own bright, softly glowing light.

I hope you can see the Milky Way in its glory. And when you realize its vastness and see the number of its stars beyond our sensibility, remember how vast is the measure of God's love and plan for us. “No eye has seen, no ear has heard” what God has in store “for those who love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

When Abram received God's promise, the Lord led him to look up at the stars on a dark night. We too can go outside today, remember God's promise, and look up.

PRAYER

Dear God, be near us as we gaze into the sky and remember your promise to Abram, its strength in Christ, and its coming fulfillment in glory.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

OUR DESTINY IS OF GOD

“I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come.” Isaiah 46:10

Most of us are curious about the future, aren't we? Some people are more than curious. They're desperate to know about all the tomorrows that lay before them. So they consult astrologers and psychics, thinking their way is foretold in the movement of planets and constellations in the heavens.

That kind of thinking is not right. God used the strongest terms to warn Israel against astrology (Deuteronomy 18:10), calling them to trust him instead. So, too, we are to trust in God for our future. The thought that stars and planets directly affect us is also ludicrous to astronomers, for many reasons (just ask one!).

To assure us that we are cared for, Jesus points us to the flowers of the field. Their splendor is greater than Solomon's, he says, and yet they depend entirely upon God and do not worry from day to day. God cares for the flowers and clothes them with glory. God also cares for the stars, calling each one by name.

God cares for each one of us too. Jesus says this truth lies before our very eyes. It's simply up to us to see it and to live with calm assurance in response. God is the one who shapes our destiny and engineers our circumstances, as Oswald Chambers would put it. Our part is to respond to God, love him, and obey him. And all of this, from beginning to end, is for the glory of God.

PRAYER

Dear God, in the swirl and chaos and uncertainty of daily living, let us rest in the good news that our lives are in your hands all of the time, every day, for your sake. Amen.

WEARING OUT AND LIVING FOREVER

“They will perish, but you remain. . . .”

Psalm 102:26

When will our world end? How will it end? These questions have animated thinkers for thousands of years. More recently they have occupied astronomers too. They measure the expansion of the universe to estimate how many billions of years we have left. Some get quite sober as they announce a certain and final end of all things as we know them.

They should read this psalm. It tells us there's a mortality built into the world. The psalmist says again and again that our lives are like a breath, a shadow, withered grass. The psalmist also says that the whole world is like this. The whole world will perish and be discarded. Thus a tone of sadness pervades this sobering psalm.

But there is also gladness and confidence in such a world, and this must be noticed! First, God will never change or come to an end. And because of that, God's people will always live in his glorious presence.

The world passes away. But God lives forever. And we too, by the Lord's mercy, will live forever before him. Though astronomers see sobering things in the future, Christians can and do look in the same direction and see things that make them glad. They see unending life in the presence of God! Established in Christ, we can face whatever comes with confidence.

Our God reigns!

PRAYER

In the face of a bewildering and sad world, Father, thank you for your many promises of life in your presence. Strengthen our confidence in you, O Lord. In Jesus' name, Amen.

AT NIGHT HIS SONG

By day the LORD directs his love, at night his song
is with me

Psalm 42:8

“Where is your God?” That’s what too many scientists (and others) say to believers. It stings. When we think about the cold vastness of space and cannot see evidence of its purpose, we can feel orphaned and left on our own, as Loren Eiseley would put it. Overwhelmed by deep sorrows sweeping over us, we can only call out in the silence for the God whom we deeply desire. The psalmist gives us words for that. With eloquent phrases the psalmist expresses our desperation and helps us to pour out our hearts.

But the psalmist gives us other words too. These words lead us to hope in God. They lead us to praise God in our speech and song.

Observing the stars, the amateur astronomer is often alone. God’s mercy can come in this peaceful time after a day of stress, sadness, and hard questions. The night is quiet. Wandering animals have settled down. Starlight shimmers on quieted ponds and lakes. Gentle breezes soothe prairies and hills. Such silence in the presence of God’s glory brings songs to one’s heart.

For me, softly sung praises and spoken prayers come easily to mind and voice. Jesus, praying through the night, also comes to mind. And hope softly returns. God’s Word is sure. Soon sleep comes deeply, followed by morning. God has come near, and I am refreshed.

PRAYER

Loving Creator, when life becomes too heavy
and fearsome, bring us to a place of peace.
Again let us know your peaceful hope. In
Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

A MOUNTAINTOP EXPERIENCE

Exalt the LORD our God and worship at his holy
mountain
Psalm 99:9

The sky is clearest on mountaintops. The best telescopes are located there, above clouds and storms. At the world's highest observatory atop Mount Evans near Denver, a sunset captured my heart with its beauty. At that altitude (14,148 feet) we were in the windy jet stream, short of oxygen, and cold. I quickly found that the opportunity to see more than we could see below demanded basic survival technique. We sought shelter and followed checklists. The mountain is an awesome yet dangerous place. Woe to any who are unprepared!

How much like worship! In worship we approach God, who dwells in unsurpassed beauty and holiness. "Holy, holy, holy," cry the angels who see God's glory (Isaiah 6:3). God's presence is where we all want to be; it lifts us to marvel at God's majesty. Our desire to go to mountaintops, literally and emotionally, is a sign of that. But when we come into God's presence, we must also be pure in order to survive. "Who [indeed] may ascend the hill of the Lord?" Only through God's mercy can we "stand in his holy place" (Psalm 24:3).

The good news in Christ is that we "have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem . . . of the living God" (Hebrews 12:22). In worship we combine reverence and joy, wonder and humble caution. That's a true mountaintop experience!

PRAYER

Almighty God, bring us to your holy mountain of worship, that we may receive your joy and your assurance of mercy in your glorious presence. Through Jesus, Amen.

LIFE BEYOND EARTH COME NEAR

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling
among us. John 1:14

Is there life beyond earth? Not merely bacterial life, but civilizations with whom we could communicate and learn marvelous things? In today's searching for extra-terrestrial intelligence, scientists build machines to listen to millions of radio frequencies. Confident astronomers hope to discover that we are not alone. They bring overpowering statistical arguments and conclude that such life simply must exist!

Other scientists, however, are much more cautious after seeing how finely tuned so many circumstances must be for us to exist on earth. They find life itself to be an incredible wonder!

But life beyond earth has already appeared. It's the life that animates the whole world: the life of Jesus Christ, through whom all things were made. The Son of God took on human form so that we could understand, and yet many of us mistook him as one under a curse and killed him. "We esteemed him not" (Isaiah 53:3).

But Jesus was not surprised. He knew that his death was the sacrifice required to cover our sin against God. And now we who are pardoned and cleansed through his death are joined to live with him forever.

Christ's rule fills all the galaxies and directs all of history. Our Lord and Savior aims at communicating and communing with us. Do you hear?

PRAYER

Almighty God, give us ears to hear, eyes to see, and minds to understand what the Spirit says to us about Jesus Christ and his glory. Bring to us the wonder of your life. Amen.

KEEP CELEBRATING

“You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.”
Nehemiah 9:6

June is a month of weddings and anniversaries. These events are times of deep joy and gladness, and they give us pause to count our blessings from the Lord and to refresh our souls in God's goodness.

In fact, celebration is built right into God's creation. Celebrating is something God made us to do! When God was done with his creating work, he rested. And in his law God calls us to rest with him and to exult in the goodness and wonder of his creation! God wants us to set aside the Sabbath day for that purpose. Few sins are greater, in the eyes of the Old Testament, than breaking the Sabbath and rejecting this celebration. And one of the truest signs of genuine sorrow for sin is to take up God's celebration again. That's what Nehemiah directed the people to do when they returned from exile.

Believers today celebrate not only the first creation but also the second, everlasting re-creation in Christ. Jesus Christ has saved God's creation by his death, and in his rising he brings it into new life and eternal victory. And for this and our salvation we celebrate!

It's wonderful to join in the happiness of a celebration! Isn't it awful to miss one, especially if loved ones are there? Look around! Consider our great God, who made this wonderful world. Consider Jesus, who has saved it. Consider the love of God, and celebrate!

PRAYER

Glorious God, bring to our minds a reverent, attentive joy today as we absorb the good news of Christ's salvation of your world along with all who believe. In Jesus, Amen.

PRAISE AND HUMILITY

Lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy
winds . . . do his bidding . . . Psalm 148:8

Astronomy is a science that helps cultivate humility and the praise of God. Astronomers learn the maps and motions of stars and find that we're not at the center of things! Then there's the waiting for skies to clear! Stargazers have no choice but to learn to patiently wait, and wait again, for truly clear skies.

When the skies finally clear to reveal the splendor of the glistening heavens, I find that all my study keeps moving me more deeply to humility and more greatly to praise. Steve Steenwyk, a physics and astronomy professor, has helped lead his church in worship with poems designed to increase praise to God. Here are some of his lines that move us in the right direction:

In depths of space your song is heard
in silence so profound.

It thunders through the wondering soul
and rings the whole world round.

You've given minds to understand,
and light by which to see
four forces thread this woven web
of mass and energy.

We ask you, Lord, for wisdom deep
to see our Maker's ways,
within each atom and each star,
and so to sing your praise.

PRAYER

Thank you, God, for shedding the light of your glory on our daily living. Increase in us humility and praise, and bring us nearer to you today, we pray, for your glory. Amen.

SHINE LIKE STARS

Without fault in a crooked and depraved generation
... shine like stars in the universe. Philippians 2:15

Long ago, when Moses described what a cursed life would be like, he said, “The sky over your head will be bronze” (Deuteronomy 28:23). Sometimes we experience such skies during days that are hot, hazy, humid, and oppressive in every way. We can’t wait for nightfall to bring relief from the draining, disheartening heat.

Moses referred to such oppressive skies to describe the spiritual reality of the curse of sin pressing down upon us. Life without God yields nothing but a monotone spectacle of unending sameness and heavy exhaustion (Ecclesiastes 1). The sky above is bright without being clear. It makes us squint and brings such a dimness into our living that even sight becomes a burden.

But when stars at night shine through the haze, we again see that there’s a different, vividly sparkling design of color and contrast. We can see again, and the cool of night is refreshing. We may even become more energized, moving around more confidently and freely.

The confidence of godly living radiates from believers who shine like stars in a corrupt generation. Such Christians set good examples for others to see. Paul calls upon Christ’s followers to shine like stars because they can give hope and direction to those around them. This brings refreshment to people’s souls and gives them confidence for daily living. How will you shine today?

PRAYER

God of light, bring us to shine like stars so that others may wonder and ask about you. And help us all to stay in the ways of light, that we may enjoy your blessings. In Jesus, Amen.

WHAT CAN YOU SEE?

“Hear this, you foolish and senseless people, who have eyes but do not see . . .” Jeremiah 5:21

On a clear dark night, if we made work of it, it's possible to see more than two thousand stars at one time. How many can you see?

If your daytime sky looked blue and clear, and you still can't see many stars at night, it's likely suffering from light-pollution. This is the result of parking lights at shopping malls, security lights at businesses and at home, and street lamps that shine upward. Some commercial lights, by design, are beamed directly into the sky in the hope that their reflection off of haze or water vapor will draw people's attention to a grand opening or midnight sale. For those who love and study the night sky, all this is unwelcome and even wasteful.

There are, of course, all kinds of pollution that obscure our vision of God's true glory shining in our world and through the Scriptures. We might call these mind pollution and heart pollution. The people of Israel suffered spiritually and morally from such kinds of pollution. By turning from God and following their own way, they could no longer see the glory of God or respond to its leading. Their world shrank to the lines of their own daily preoccupations. Nothing else mattered to them, and for that they were punished and exiled.

Do you see God's glory at night and during the day? Do you sense God's glory throughout all of living?

PRAYER

Father, keep us from becoming polluted and losing sight of the glory you have placed in your world and in our hearts. Help us see and delight in your glory each day. In Jesus, Amen.

THIS IS MY FATHER'S WORLD

O . . . God, you are very great; you are clothed
with splendor and majesty. Psalm 104:1

This psalm takes us on a tour of the cosmos as God created it. We gaze upon the heavens and consider the clouds and observe the seasons of the moon. We tour the vast oceans and see playful sea monsters. We survey mountains and valleys and linger beside fields and streams to watch the creatures that live there.

Notice the way humans are mentioned in this psalm. Our living and working are simply not given much attention. The world belongs to God, and its glory and our praise add to God's own. In fact, this psalm emphasizes how all living things depend wholly on God and his mercy for every meal and every breath.

In the northern hemisphere, today is the "longest" day of the year. Today is the summer solstice, when the earth stops tipping us toward the sun and begins drawing us away again. Tonight will give us only a few dark hours to consider the glory of the heavens, but we'll have more sunlight than any other day of the year to consider all that God has done around us on the earth.

The cosmos inspires the psalmist to praise and wonder. What will you do today? Enjoy a walk? Go fishing? We can hardly be admirers of God if we do not enjoy the outdoors. So, with the psalmist, may we also be glad today—glad for life in such a wonderful creation, and glad for God's mercy to see and exult in it.

PRAYER

Lord, thank you for teaching us that this whole world belongs to you. Increase your glory today, and may we serve and love you with all our hearts in your world! Amen.

UNAPPROACHABLE LIGHT

God . . . alone is immortal and . . . lives in unapproachable light

1 Timothy 6:15-16

Twenty minutes of darkness prepares the eyes to see best in the dark. But to see the sun, careful preparations must be made. The sun is brilliant! The safest route is not to look at all, of course, or to look only indirectly at the sun's light striking a paper or the ground after it has passed through a tiny pinhole. Commercial filters that eliminate almost 100 percent of the sun's light also allow safe viewing. The safety of looking at the sun through exposed film or welder's glasses is uncertain. Without the right precautions, the eye's retina can burn in a second and become injured beyond healing.

God is more brilliant than the sun, Paul tells us; the Lord's brilliance is unapproachable. So when we speak of coming near God, there's a safety issue to consider! Paying attention to this issue is called reverence. Ignoring this requirement leads to destruction.

So how do we approach God? We approach God by being "clothed . . . with Christ" (Galatians 3:27). Our whole appearance, manner, and activity must be so closely joined to Christ that God does not see us apart from his Son. Paul urges Timothy, and Scripture urges us all, to flee evil and pursue righteousness, love, endurance, and gentleness. We must fight the good fight and take hold of eternal life. Then, in Christ's appearing, we can draw near to God.

PRAYER

Almighty God, give us a sense of your radiant holiness and bring us to find all our strength and hope in Christ, that we may come alive in your presence today. In Jesus' name, Amen.

CONFIDENT NAVIGATION

They are . . . wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever. Jude 13

Who are the most important persons in our lives? Our loved ones, of course. And among them is usually someone we look to whenever we must make an important decision. “What would my dad or mom do in this situation?” we might ask. Or, “What would my teacher think of this?” We live with many people in our hearts when we make important decisions. Such people are shining lights in our lives. We navigate by means of their constancy in matters that are important: choosing a school, taking a job, getting married, buying a car.

All navigators must learn about the brightest stars. These stars stay in the same place, so navigators depend on them to find their way through seas and skies.

If a star wanders, the navigator setting sights on it will get lost. The Greek word for “wandering stars” refers to planets. These “stars” keep moving along in the sky—and sometimes even reverse course! How can anyone steer by stars that don’t stay put?

Jude is saying that some people are like planets. They change their minds, wander in their convictions, reverse their opinions, and thus cannot be relied on as guides to right living for God. These people stand in contrast with steady Christians and students of the Word. How do you navigate through life? The best way is by sighting on Christ, the Word of God, and his true followers.

PRAYER

Lord, bring to our minds the constant stars in our lives, your people faithful in following Christ, so that we may keep advancing the work of your kingdom. In his name, Amen.

WHAT DO WE WORSHIP?

Be silent before the Sovereign LORD, for the day of
the LORD is near. Zephaniah 1:7

Remember Stonehenge? That circle of huge stones in England has captivated the interest of many people. Who constructed this and why? Scholars have pretty much concluded that these stones have both a religious and astronomical function. Or perhaps I should say *astrological*. Astronomy is a science. Astrology is superstition. Astronomy seeks to understand. Astrology seeks to mark signs and determine portents for the future. Stonehenge appears to be organized to mark special positions of the stars and planets, perhaps for religious observances geared to health and prosperity.

In recent years, many sites like Stonehenge have been discovered all over the world. They all appear to combine religious activity with movements in the heavens. Much of ancient astronomy was motivated by people's desire to gain religious power for their own ambitions.

We do well to examine ourselves on this day of worship. Why do we worship? What religious power do we seek? How do we go about finding health and prosperity? What do we depend on to help us accomplish our ambitions and dreams?

The Bible calls us to seek all things from the God who created us and saved us through his Son. Let us worship him only, and thank the one true God for shining his light in our darkness.

PRAYER

Dear God, you are the Living One, Maker of heaven and earth. Keep our focus on you, and guard us from holding to any superstitions of good fortune or bad. In Jesus, Amen.

THE STAR AND THE CROSS

When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

Matthew 2:10

Matthew tells the marvelous story of wise men from the east offering praise to God and gifts to the newborn King. Many people have long wondered how they arrived there. A recent study by Michael Molar suggests that the words “star in the east” and “went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was” are phrases of ancient astrology referring to the movement of Jupiter among the constellations, indicating, by their reasoning, that a great king was born among the Jewish people.

King Herod, of course, saw this as a threat. He called for his own Hebrew scholars, who gave further directions to guide the wise men and thus to help him identify his competitor to the throne. Later he would send his soldiers to murder the baby boys of Bethlehem.

What moved the wise men to great joy filled Herod with dread and anger. God’s sign to the wise men led them to worship, offering, and gladness. God’s Word through the prophet led Herod to fear and bloodshed.

Thus Jesus entered the world with joy in the heavens and anguish on the earth. If the heavens cry out God’s glory and the Word explains it with such power, how could we ever neglect so great a salvation as that offered by the One born a King and destined, through the cross, to become Savior and Lord?

PRAYER

O God of heaven and earth, open our eyes to the signs of your greatness and our ears to your goodness, that we may worship with joy and enter your salvation today. In Jesus, Amen.

SEEING CROSSES

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord
Jesus Christ Galatians 6:14

What do you see when you look around? Some people see dollar signs. In the sky I see crosses. There are two famous asterisms (patterns of stars) named the Northern Cross and the Southern Cross. The Northern Cross is also known as the “summer triangle,” composed of the bright stars Vega, Deneb, and Altair. It hangs in the east on June evenings. Deneb is also part of the constellation Cygnus. The beautiful and striking Southern Cross is visible in the southern hemisphere. Someday I hope to see it!

But what’s important about these crosses is not so much seeing them as noting what they mean to us. Paul teaches that the cross is not only a pattern for us to visualize but also a pattern for us to understand how much God loves the world. The cross represents an event of God’s work that has changed all reality in this world! At the cross, the rebellion against God was defeated, once for all. Through Christ’s death on the cross, the world’s sin has been atoned for. By the way of the cross, we find the way of life modeled by Jesus, who defeated Satan there and then rose gloriously to life again.

When you see crosses, what do you think about? May it be the glory of Jesus Christ, the Lamb sacrificed for our sin, the King of all things who fills your imagination and crowds out all unworthy thoughts from your mind.

PRAYER

Father, keep the cross before our minds and hearts at all times, that we may grow in understanding, in love, and in true joy. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE ELEMENTS

Since everything will be destroyed in this way
you ought to live holy and godly lives 2 Peter 3:11

In August 1945 the explosions of atomic bombs decisively brought open conflict to an end in the Pacific theater of World War II. Both my father and father-in-law were slated for the Japan invasion effort. They are convinced they would have been killed if the conflict there had continued. As a result, arguments about that use of the bomb involve me rather personally.

For decades, the world has wondered and worried about nuclear weapons. That's a good thing. Serious questions against nuclear arsenals now held by nations of the world deserve a thorough hearing. The consequences of a nuclear war can hardly be imagined. And because the effects of nuclear blasts were and are taken seriously, policies to ensure peace can be set in place.

From Peter we learn that something far more unimaginable will happen on "the day of the Lord." The elements will be burned up. Astronomers may think this refers to future explosions of the sun billions of years from now, but as we think about such things, we must ask, "How will God execute judgment?" We cannot be sure, exactly, but we know it will be awful beyond imagining.

And yet there are ways to prepare. Confidence and even peace can be ours. What is the way of preparation? To know Jesus as Lord and Savior and to follow him in godly living, waiting eagerly for his return in victory.

PRAYER

Dear Father, as you preserve the world from destruction, preserve our souls. Give us confidence today in your purpose for us and for your world. In Jesus, Amen.

THE THEATER OF GOD'S VICTORY

All mankind will fear; they will proclaim the works of God and ponder what he has done. Psalm 64:9

Under siege. Facing threats. In need. People who believe God's Word keenly feel the warfare between the evil in this world and the power of God. God's victory, however, is sure, and the ruin of all that opposes God is guaranteed. God will deliver his people and the world he has made! But then what?

The redeemed will ponder what God has done, praise the Lord, and inquire into his salvation. They'll pay attention to the whole thing: God's creation, God's redeeming victory, and God's purpose yet to be fulfilled.

Paying attention to God's works is the current occupation of believers. Believing scholars, scientists, and everyday people like us work hard at paying attention and thinking about God and all his wonderful works. As John Calvin once wrote, "We have been placed here, as in a spacious theater, to behold the works of God; and there is no work of God so small that we ought to pass by it lightly, but all ought to be carefully and diligently observed." All of us need prayer to keep going in our work to serve our God in studying, understanding, and declaring his glory.

When we admire beautiful flowers, listen to arresting bird songs, and note the play of sunlight and the shadow of passing storms, let us join, as we are able, in rapt attention to all the marvelous works of God.

PRAYER

Loving Father, what care you have invested in this beautiful world. With what great power you have saved the world! Bring us to see more and more of you in it. Amen.

DIFFERING SPLENDORS

Star differs from star in splendor. So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. 1 Corinthians 15:41-42

One night in 1609 a minister in the Netherlands walked home from his church. He looked up and saw a star he had not seen since 1596! In this way he discovered the first variable star—a star that regularly changes in brightness. Tens of thousands of these are known today, and stargazers around the world monitor them. Stars and humans change most when they are young and old. As stars age, they even change color.

Stars are different from each other! This is what impressed Paul when teaching about the resurrection. The questions, of course, were fundamental: What will our bodies be like when we rise from the dead? What will it be like to see again those who have already died?

Paul responds by reminding us that the world is filled with many different, marvelous things. Even the stars are different from each other! So are our physical bodies. And we can trust the Creator of all these different things to bring us to an eternal life full of blessing. God will move us from perishable, dishonorable, weak, and natural bodies to bodies that are imperishable, honorable, powerful, and spiritual. God gives us bodies according to his purpose for us. And we shall all be changed.

The Word of God stands. Let us not stumble over our doubts and questions but rely on the creating and re-creating God to make things right.

PRAYER

Dear God, show us the wonders of your creation so that we can more quickly and completely believe the promises about your new creation. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

CHRIST IS THE MORNING STAR

“I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.” Revelation 22:16

About an hour before the sun rises in the northern hemisphere, a number of the bright planets—Venus, Jupiter, and Mars can be seen shining in the east. The brightest of these is Venus. It’s known as the morning star when visible in the morning before sunrise, and it’s called the evening star when visible after sunset. It’s brilliant, really the brightest object in the sky after the sun and moon. When we see it in the morning, Venus brightly signals that sunrise is not far away. When its orbit takes it high in a dark early-morning sky, the announcement is quite powerful: night is almost over!

The apostle John conveys to us Jesus’ bold assertion that he is “the bright Morning Star.” Jesus is the One who announces the end of the reign of darkness. He’s the One whose coming tells us that as surely as the sun will rise to bring a new day when the morning star appears, so too a new day is surely coming, and the sign of it is his appearing! “The old is gone, the new has come!” as the apostle Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 5:17.

The question for us today is whether in the darkness we see Christ as the Morning Star, whether we know what that means, and whether we will act on that meaning. Jesus’ brilliance in the darkness of this world signals the end of that darkness.

Look to him and live!

PRAYER

Almighty God, help us to see Jesus as the sure signal that you are coming to establish your kingdom in its fullness. And strengthen us to walk faithfully in Jesus’ name. Amen.