May the LORD our God be with us as he was with our ancestors; may he never leave us nor forsake us. — 1 KINGS 8:57

WHAT’S INSIDE

It's a new year filled with new beginnings. For us at Forward in Christ, we are debuting a new look for you, our readers. Taking into account answers and comments from our readers survey last year, we have added new columns, expanded old favorites, and freshened up our design. You’ll see some new authors presenting the age-old saving message of Christ crucified. You’ll meet WELS members from around the world who will share their stories of faith. Many articles this month will follow the theme “New beginnings,” as we all start the new year with our Lord.

Besides a redesigned magazine, we are also introducing a new website, forwardinchrist.net. There you will find more resources to grow in your faith as well as more opportunities to share photos and news from your congregations. You can also sign up for a free weekly e-newsletter for expanded articles and sneak peeks into future issues.

Please take time this month to explore what’s new in the magazine and online. Then let us know what you think. E-mail us at fic@wels.net or catch us online at forwardinchrist.net/submit.

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FEATURED ONLINE

This Is WELS! See more photos of members from around the world at forwardinchrist.net.

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Those aren’t bad resolutions. If you’re one of the 8 percent of people who keep resolutions like that every year, you’ve probably found great blessings in them. But God offers us even more meaningful resolutions. He doesn’t just encourage us to change how we take care of our bodies or spend our money. He talks about changing who we are.

BEING WHO GOD MADE US TO BE

You are a forgiven child of God. That’s the new identity God gives to you in your baptism. You are justified, declared not guilty because of the work of Christ. Now God calls us to live as the holy people he has declared us to be. The Bible calls this a life of sanctification. It’s serious work. A life of sanctification is a natural one for believers, but it doesn’t come naturally.

Peter lists seven Christian virtues to add to our faith: moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, patient endurance, godliness, brotherly affection, and love.

Which of them do you struggle with most? Do those around you recognize your high morals or is your life like the lives of those who don’t know Jesus? Have the frustrations of life dissolved your patient endurance? Does your schedule rob you of time you might use to practice brotherly affection with fellow believers?

You’re not the first to struggle. God says it calls for “every effort.” It’s hard. And just as losing weight or changing your habits takes constant work, growing in Christian virtues is a daily challenge.

But it’s not quite right to say it’s changing who we are. It’s becoming who God declared us to be. Peter begins his next paragraph addressing the believers as “brothers.” What a beautiful reminder! We don’t live this way to become God’s children. We are simply striving to live as the children of God he’s made us to be.

SETTING OUR EYES ON CHRIST

God attaches an incredible promise to an earnest life of sanctification. Second Peter continues, “If you do these things, you will never stumble. In fact, in this way you will be richly supplied with an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:10).

God calls us to live as the holy people he has declared us to be.

Taking your life of sanctification seriously doesn’t earn you a place in heaven, but it does help you hold on to the gift God’s given you. Consider these truths: God says that sinful desires “war against” our souls (1 Peter 2:11). Striving for moral excellence shields us from many of those attacks.

God has given us all we need for our Christian lives (2 Peter 1:3). As you grow in this Christian living—even imperfectly—you’ll see God keeping his promise. By adding knowledge and brotherly affection to your faith, that means you’re committed to being in God’s Word and around his people. As you do that, God will use the gospel to feed your faith and assure you of your forgiveness.

God bless you with another year of growing in his love!
Safe in the power of God

It’s easy to forget that gospel ministry—and even living as a confessing disciple of Jesus Christ—can be risky. Recent political unrest in Ethiopia caused some frightening moments for missionaries and pastors of WELS and our sister church bodies in Africa.

Last fall, two events were scheduled to take place in Ethiopia. Representatives of our sister churches in Africa had scheduled a regional conference in the city of Bishofu, about two hours from the capital of Addis Ababa. In connection with that conference, the Lutheran Church of Ethiopia planned a special worship service to dedicate the new building that would house its theological training school. I was invited to attend.

As soon as I arrived in Addis Ababa, I received a phone call from Sean Young, WELS director of missions operations. He asked where I was, because violent political riots had broken out in Bishofu. The US State Department was urging all American citizens to leave the country as soon as possible. He advised me not to leave the airport and to find a flight out of the country immediately.

Thankfully, a flight was available 14 hours later. While waiting for the flight, I learned that other WELS and African pastors already in Bishofu had been surrounded in their vehicles several times by angry mobs. Thankfully, nothing more happened to them, and they were able to leave the country shortly after I did. The conference and dedication were canceled.

The advice to leave was not an overreaction or false alarm. The rioting spread quickly to other cities, including the capital. Nearly 70 people were killed in Addis Ababa; more than 200 were injured.

Even though none of us were harmed, the events of that day were a stark reminder that gospel ministry sometimes brings real dangers with it. That’s easy to forget in the comfort and security of the United States. In many parts of the world, peaceful streets can turn dangerous.

As I waited for my flight, those events led me to think of the unrest taking place in Hong Kong, where our synod’s Asia Lutheran Seminary trains pastors and church workers. Will the teachers and students be safe? I thought of India, where the government is openly hostile to Christianity and has forced WELS friendly counselors to leave the country. I thought of our fellow Christians in predominantly Muslim countries like Indonesia and Pakistan, where confessing Christ can literally result in imprisonment or even death.

When we think of the dangers and threats to God’s faithful people around the world, we are compelled to pray fervently. We pray for God’s protection. We pray that the Holy Spirit gives us— and all of us—boldness, courage, and faithfulness. And we pray that even if some doors are closed, God would continue to open new doors for his saving gospel. We pray with confidence, knowing that we can say with faithful Christian witnesses everywhere as the hymn so beautifully says, “No pow’r of hell, no scheme of man can ever pluck me from his hand; till he returns or calls me home, here in the pow’r of Christ I’ll stand” (Christian Worship: Supplement 752:4).

Mark G. Schroeder | WELS President

READ MORE about unrest in East Asia on p. 22.
Mark Hartman and his family. His daughter Sarah (far left photo) and son-in-law Anar and their family are core members of a new mission in Houston. Mark and his wife, Phyllis, are also members of that mission.

strings attached, no special works, no measuring stick of how good I was.” After the evangelist left, Mark immediately called Phyllis to see if this is what she believed. “She confirmed that this was the truth, and my walk of faith had begun,” says Mark.

That fall he started taking Bible information classes at Shepherd of the Plains, a WELS church in Lubbock, Texas. “I hadn’t read the Bible much, so actually reading it and trying to understand what it said was perfect for the engineer in me,” he says. “It is so logical. There are no contradictions. I just soaked it up.”

Mark and Phyllis got married that December, and after moving to Houston, they joined Christ the Lord in Houston.

SHARING THE MESSAGE

But that isn’t the end of the story. “That night set off a series of events that changed the course of my life and had a profound impact on other lives as Mark began sharing the message, especially after he had a stroke that made him dependent on others for the last two years of his life. And the Holy Spirit worked through their witness.”

Mark says he is looking forward to meeting that evangelist back in heaven someday. “For all he knows, our encounter was just another empty discussion. I hope that he comes up to me in heaven and says, ‘Hey, it was me!’ And I’ll just hug him.”

Mark Hartman and his family. His daughter Sarah (far left photo) and son-in-law Anar and their family are core members of a new mission in Houston. Mark and his wife, Phyllis, are also members of that mission.

and always shared a tremendous gospel message at the end of each update,” says Mark. “I would forward the emails to my mom since she knew them.”

He continues, “It was immediately after their daughter died that my mom called me and asked me if I knew of any basic Bible classes that she could take. There is no doubt in my mind that the Holy Spirit was using those messages on her.”

That desire to share the gospel message continued through Mark and Phyllis’ daughter Sarah, who is in high school had begun dating her now-husband Anar, a man from Azerbaijan who knew little about Christianity. “As their relationship grew, so did our daughter’s desire to have her boyfriend learn about Jesus,” says Mark. Anar took basic Bible classes and joined the church. Now he is the president of a new mission church that just started in Houston, of which Mark and Phyllis are part of the core group (see sidebar).

Mark’s dad still wasn’t interested, even though Mark, his mom, and especially Phyllis would present the law and gospel to him. But they continued to share the message, especially after he had a stroke that made him dependent on others for the last two years of his life. And the Holy Spirit worked through their witness. “On one of his last days, he confessed to my mom that he believed that Jesus was his Savior,” says Mark.

Mark currently serves as a layman on the Board for Home Missions. As a member of the Board for Home Missions, he gets to put his love for witnessing into action by helping make decisions on where to start new mission churches while being wise stewards of synod resources.

He shares the lifelong lesson he learned from the evangelist who knocked on his door that night. “This missionary back in 1981 cared enough about me; we should care about others in that same way. I think that’s what drives me. My message to others is to try to have as many conversations about Jesus as you can. The more you can share Jesus and what he has done, the more opportunities the Holy Spirit can use you to work. You won’t even know what God used you to do until you’re in heaven.”

Mark says he is looking forward to meeting that evangelist from his past in heaven someday. “For all he knows, our encounter was just another empty discussion. I hope that he comes up to me in heaven and says, ‘Hey, it was me!’ And I’ll just hug him.”

Mark and Phyllis Hartman are part of a core group for a new mission in Houston, Texas, that was just approved for funding by the Board for Home Missions in spring 2019. The seven families that form the core group were from WELS churches in the area and have been meeting monthly for Bible study since 2015. The new mission is located in an urban neighborhood called The Heights that is seeing a resurgence in popularity as people strive to be closer to the city center of Houston. Andrew Nemmers, a 2019 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, was assigned to serve the group last May. Mark shares that the group is starting to reach out into the community as they prepare to launch weekly worship services in September 2020. The name of this new church? Hope Lutheran. “We’re here to offer hope in The Heights,” says Mark. Pictured are Mark and Phyllis with a group from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary who came to work with the core group last January.
Comes to the Original English, an Epiphany is a revelation or an insight. For example, a woman puzzles over a problem at work all day. Then, during her commute home, she has an epiphany: the answer suddenly materializes in her mind.

It’s not exactly how we use the word in the church year, though there is a connection. Epiphany comes from a Greek word that means “appearance” or “manifestation.” In the New Testament, forms of the word usually refer to Jesus’ first or second coming. For example, Paul writes of the grace of God appearing on this earth in the person of Jesus—“God in the flesh” (2 Corinthians 8:9). And what the Scriptures reveal about him.

THE SAVIOR OF ALL

The season begins with the festival of the Epiphany of Our Lord, observed in Western Christianity on Jan. 6. Traditionally it is a day to remember the coming of the wise men (Matthew 2:1–12). As we hear about Magi from a distant country visiting the Christ Child, we see Jesus appear as the Savior of all nations.

While this may seem obvious to us, it would have been a revelation to many of the Jews of Jesus’ day who had lost sight of the Messiah’s mission to be a light for the Gentiles and to bring salvation to the ends of the earth (Isaiah 42:6). It took a while for this idea to sink in even with Jesus’ disciples—even after Pentecost. When God sent Peter to preach to the gentile Cornelius, Peter said, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him” (Acts 10:34–35, emphasis added). And when the Gentiles believed his message and received the Holy Spirit, “The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles” (Acts 10:45, emphasis added). And when the Gentiles believed his message and received the Holy Spirit, “The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles” (Acts 10:45, emphasis added). And when the Gentiles believed his message and received the Holy Spirit, “The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles” (Acts 10:45, emphasis added).

Jesus is the Savior of all people. If you’re not surprised by these truths, it’s because you’ve already had your “aha” moment. It happened when you came to faith—perhaps even when you were baptized as a baby. That was the day Jesus appeared to you. It’s when you had your “epiphany.” But we need the reminder. That’s not always the first thing that appears in our minds. Don’t we know that Jesus is the Savior of all?

AN ALMIGHTY SAVIOR

Epiphany also reveals that Jesus is the all-powerful God. No one would have guessed it by looking at him, but he made the claim and backed it up with miracles. Nathanael doubted that the Messiah could come from Nazareth until Jesus told him he had seen him under a fig tree before they ever met. That was Nathanael’s “aha” moment: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel” (John 1:49). Shortly after that, Jesus turned water into wine at the wedding at Cana—“the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him” (John 2:11). Yet later we find those same disciples surprised by Jesus’ power. When he calmed the storm, they said, “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!” (Matthew 8:27).

So, perhaps the only thing surprising to you so far is how surprised Jesus’ disciples could be. But his power is important for us to remember. Consider the stubborn problems in your life. The disease that knows no cure. The depression you can’t shake. The temptation that won’t leave you alone. The relationship that never gets better. The kids who won’t listen. Does it occur to you that Jesus is fully capable of fixing what’s broken or helping you handle the brokenness? So often we agonize over our problems as if we’ve forgotten that Jesus is the almighty God.

Catching the Epiphany season is a time to focus on God appearing on this earth in the person of Jesus . . . and what the Scriptures reveal about him.

The Epiphany season is a time to focus on God appearing on this earth in the person of Jesus. For example, Paul writes of the grace of God appearing on this earth in the person of Jesus—“God in the flesh” (2 Corinthians 8:9). And what the Scriptures reveal about him.

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Like his disciples, we need to be reminded of these things, and the Epiphany season does just that. In fact, it reveals even more. At the end of the Epiphany season, we get front-row seats to another “aha” moment for the disciples. At the top of a mountain, Jesus was transfigured, and Peter, James, and John got to see a little glimpse of who he really is. But the Father’s voice from the cloud proclaimed more than Jesus’ divinity. “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matthew 17:5). God put his stamp of approval on everything Jesus did, said, and thought for 33 years. Let that sink in! It matters because what Jesus did counts for you. Through faith in him, you are just as much God’s child as Jesus himself, just as beloved and pleasing to your Father as he is. Remember what John the Baptist reveals to us this Epiphany season when he says, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). He was looking back to the Old Testament lambs sacrificed for the people and ahead to Jesus’ suffering and death. It wouldn’t have been hard for those watching Jesus during Holy Week to see how he was like a Lamb, being led uncomplaining to the slaughter. What no one would have known, however, was that this sacrifice would take away the sin of the world. So John—and Jesus and his apostles—proclaimed it: God’s Son appeared on this earth as the sacrifice that removes our sins. Our slowness to believe and quickness to forget are forgiven by his blood.

These truths never would have dawned on us. But Jesus appeared as a light dawning on the land of the shadow of death (Matthew 4:16). He reveals himself to us through his gospel. That’s the whole point of Epiphany.

And it happens all year long. Any time we remember our baptism, we are reminded of our perfect standing in God’s family. Whenever we take his Supper, Jesus is in, with, and under the bread and wine to forgive us. Every time we hear his Word, Jesus comes to us in grace, strengthening us as we look forward to his appearing in glory. These are the little epiphanies we constantly need!

Samuel Degner, a professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin, is a member at Christ Alone, Thiensville, Wisconsin.
Guilt from an abortion consumed a woman until she began to believe and hold on to God’s promise of forgiveness.

Pamela K. Manske

A soft, gentle rain was falling that August morning. It was on my daily walk that I saw in the distance the figure of a woman sitting on a concrete step. She was huddled over with her arms clasping her knees and her head buried in her chest. As I drew nearer to her, I heard soft, muffled sobs. When she heard me approach, she got up suddenly to dart away, but she slowed when I called out to her. “Wait! I want to help you. Come and sit with me.” I asked her if sitting on the steps of the pregnancy care center had anything to do with her crying. She was silent. I told her that I was a volunteer there, along with many other women. I explained that we were there to assist any woman in need of anything. She dejectedly replied, “That wouldn’t be me. I am beyond help.”

Many triggers took Amy back to that day. Her grief never seemed to end, and it was magnified whenever she encountered things such as baby clothes, newborns, strollers and yes, the color pink. She wouldn’t shake the feeling that the hundreds of days of sadness she experienced were the punishment she deserved. She saw no way out of her guilt and grief. She was overwhelmed with feelings of shame and regret.

Help after an Abortion

An estimated 60+ million babies have been aborted in the United States since the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision to legalize abortion. More than 4 in 10 women who have had an abortion were churchgoers when they ended a pregnancy. Pamela shares advice of how you can help a friend or fellow church member face the pain caused by an abortion:

• Talk less, and listen with your heart. She will feel that you are helping her shoulder the burden with true compassion.
• Require nothing from her. Don’t try to fix her pain, but let it surface. It is a necessary part of healing.
• Encourage her to think of her child as a person. She could name the baby or write a letter to her child.
• Offer Bible passages showing how God’s forgiveness.
• Pray with her, pray for her, and pray that God would help you to show her Christ’s love.

Psalm 103:12 to remind her that “as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.” She slowly peeled away the layers of shame, sadness, and regret. In time she began to see how much she needed Jesus. In time she began to know that the Lord was near to her in her brokenness and would never leave her. With a heart filled by the Holy Spirit, Amy began to believe and hold on to God’s promise of forgiveness. It was not until she realized that God lavishes all of us, sinners all alike, with his sacrificial, unconditional love that she was finally able to forgive herself. Finally, no longer crushed in spirit, she could truly rejoice as a redeemed child of God.

No longer consumed by her memories, new joy has entered Amy’s life. By coming to know God’s truth and his grace and love, she is free to forgive herself and others. She is free to love and be loved. Her heart is at rest, and she feels restored. No longer does she feel the need to turn inward, shutting out the world as she wraps her arms about her knees. Instead, she elevates herself in “Jesus’ arms of love and mercy.

She can now fully rejoice with her son and his wife as they eagerly await the birth of their daughter, a granddaugh-

ter who surely will learn of Jesus at Grandma’s knee. Lord willing, Amy will now be able to cuddle that baby in a soft, warm blanket...and yes, it will be pink!