



SACRED ALTARS AND HOLY OFFERINGS

SILENT MOMENT

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The Silent Moment

I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

—— Romans 12:1



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Sacred Altars and Holy Gifts

What constitutes a sacred altar, and what makes a gift holy? That's what first came to mind as I considered the theme for this quarter. My answers turned out to be as simple as my questions: *appropriate* altars set apart to God are sacred altars, and *appropriate* gifts set apart to God are holy gifts.

In the story of Cain and Abel, we get our first look at the need for appropriate gifts. When God accepted Abel's offering but rejected Cain's, Cain became angry and sullen. In Genesis 4:7, God said to Cain, "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?" It seems clear that Cain was aware that there was an appropriate gift or way to bring his gift to God.

There are also appropriate altars. The first mention of an altar in Scripture appears in Genesis 8:20: "Noah built an altar to the LORD and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it." Much later when God gave His law through Moses, He prescribed a certain *kind* of altar on which the people were to offer sacrifices. Altars were to be made of uncut stones. God also prescribed appropriate gifts that were to be brought for sacrifice and worship. For centuries these sacred altars and holy gifts were the means by which God's people could demonstrate their obedient trust and devotion to Him.

Then, in the fullness of time, Christ Himself became an offering—the perfect sacrifice to atone for our sin. Because of this, there is no longer any need for the previous altars and gifts. Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection have made these unnecessary.

But there is still a way for those of us who have received salvation through Christ to demonstrate our trust in and devotion to God. With the words from Romans 12:1 ringing in our ears, we recognize that the appropriate gift we are to give Him is our own

selves as living sacrifices. We are to serve our heavenly Father from sincere hearts, obeying His Word, making His gospel known, and worshiping Him individually and corporately.

What an honor that we ourselves have been set apart to God and that our very lives have become the appropriate and acceptable gifts we can offer to Him! May you always know the joy of giving yourself fully to love and serve Him.

Peace to your heart!

Christine Dallman, Editor

Back Away from Revenge

[God said to Cain,] “If you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it” (Genesis 4:7).

Scripture: Genesis 4:1–15

Song: “Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)”

A 1963 episode of *The Andy Griffith Show*—“High Noon in Mayberry”—begins with Sheriff Andy Taylor receiving a letter from a man he had wounded years earlier during a robbery. The former convict wrote that he was coming back to settle some business with Taylor. Deputy Barney Fife takes this to mean the man is coming for revenge, so the deputy panics. However, it turns out that the man’s intentions are to thank Taylor for his role in helping change his life.

It’s too bad Cain did not take a similar path. In today’s passage, God encouraged Cain to choose what is right and warned him not to give in to sin. However, Cain took things into his own hands and “settled business” with his brother, Abel, by murdering him.

I suppose it’s natural for us to feel like we want to take matters into our own hands at times. There’s something deep within us that wants to see others get what we believe is coming to them. However, as we stay focused on doing what’s right, God will make sure that what’s right wins out in the end.

Father, when I’m tempted to seek revenge, help me honor You by doing what’s right instead. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Details, Please!

[God said to Noah,] “Make yourself an ark of cypress wood. . . . This is how you are to build it: The ark is to be three hundred cubits long, fifty cubits wide and thirty cubits high” (Genesis 6:14–15).

Scripture: Genesis 6:11–22

Song: “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah”

A woman was preparing a fruit salad and handed me a whole pineapple and a large knife. “Here,” she said. “Would you cut this up, please?” My husband and I laughed because we knew I didn’t know how to cut up a pineapple, let alone discern whether she wanted chunks, tidbits, or rings. I was happy to help, but I needed detailed instructions because the wrong cut would mess up her salad.

When God determined to send a flood upon the earth, He spoke to Noah and told him exactly how to build an ark to save himself and his family. Noah didn’t have to guess what to do or create blueprints for the design. God gave him the assignment along with specific directives.

Although God calls us to participate in building His kingdom, it’s important that we remember that He is the One who knows the work He wants us to do and will show us how to do it. Our role is simply to follow His instructions.

Father, thank You for giving me Your Word so I can follow Your instructions closely. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Certain Identity

Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself (John 6:15).

Scripture: John 6:15–20

Song: “I Am His, and He Is Mine”

Although I married a farmer, I never mastered the art of farm-style cooking. When an acquaintance came to help my husband with the harvest, I served spaghetti and a green salad at supper-time. He was used to having things like roast beef, potatoes, fluffy biscuits, and homemade fruit pie. My unusual fare surprised him, and my husband—always gracious and supportive—explained that his wife isn’t a chef but a writer and speaker.

Some people had expectations about Jesus, but He understood His identity. Jesus wasn’t sent to be a political leader or a regional king. He is a heavenly king who rules in the hearts and lives of those who trust in Him. His time to rule over everything remains in the future. So in today’s passage, when Jesus recognized the agenda people had for Him and that they were going to try to force Him into a role, He removed Himself from the situation.

When we read the Bible, we learn the true identity of Jesus, and we also learn about our identity in Him. Through His example, we can see that it’s okay to walk away from expectations others may have of us that don’t align with the purposes He has for our lives.

Father, thank You for opening my eyes to who You are, and thank You for giving me the identity of belonging to You. In Jesus’ name, amen.

We're Never Abandoned

[Jesus said,] “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:18).

Scripture: John 14:18–27

Song: “There Is a Redeemer”

One day in New York, a Christian man spotted a dishevelled boy sitting on a street corner. After striking up a conversation, the man learned that three days earlier the 12-year-old had been left by his mother and was still waiting for her to return. She never showed up. The man offered the hungry boy a meal and then paid to send him to Sunday school camp. There, Bill Wilson heard the gospel for the first time and received Jesus into his heart. For more than 50 years now, Wilson—known as Pastor Bill—has dedicated his life to reaching at-risk children with the gospel message of Christ’s love and redemption.

In today’s passage, Jesus tells His disciples that He will be going away, but He won’t be abandoning them. He will be leaving, but not leaving them alone to fend for themselves. His Father will give them the Holy Spirit to guide, comfort, and empower them.

Throughout the Bible, God speaks of His compassion and care for orphans. Deuteronomy 10:18 says, “He defends the cause of the fatherless . . . , giving them food and clothing.” And Psalm 146:9 says, “The LORD . . . sustains the fatherless.” Even though we may, at times, feel abandoned by others in this world, the Lord will remain with us always.

Father, thank You for caring for me and for sending Your Holy Spirit to be with me every moment and in every circumstance. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Be Ready!

On that very day Noah and his sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, together with his wife and the wives of his three sons, entered the ark (Genesis 7:13).

Scripture: Genesis 7:11–24

Song: “There Will Be a Day”

I used to feel frazzled when I looked at my calendar, so I developed a color-coded system. Blue entries denote places where I simply show up, such as ball games and appointments. Events in red remind me of commitments I’ve made, those for which I need to prepare because a deadline is coming. A hot-pink *X* at the beginning of a week means, “This week is full,” and I prayerfully consider whether to add anything. A color-coded calendar helps me run my life instead of allowing it to run me.

When Noah completed the ark, the day came when time was up, and the first raindrops fell. Because Noah had diligently obeyed God in preparation for this imminent day, he wasn’t left scrambling. Noah and his family, along with the animals, had a safe and secure place to ride out the storm.

An imminent day we’re preparing for is the return of Christ. We don’t know the day or hour (Matthew 24:36). Will He come during our lifetime? Or will He continue to patiently wait? Peter wrote, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). In any case, let’s be ready!

Father, I know that obeying You today is the best preparation for Your imminent return. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Two Truths and a Lie

[False teachers] will secretly introduce destructive heresies. . . . In their greed these teachers will exploit you with fabricated stories (2 Peter 2:1, 3).

Scripture: 2 Peter 2:1–9

Song: “Open My Eyes That I May See”

Have you ever played the game two truths and a lie? The object is to stump other players by sharing three statements about yourself—two that are true and one that is not. For example, I might tell other players: my childhood hero is Yorkshire veterinarian James Herriott; my favorite color is burnt orange; and I have never been to Spain. In this example, only the first statement is untrue, but a person who didn’t know me could easily be fooled.

In today’s passage, Peter warns readers to be on the lookout for self-serving deceivers who would sneak in among them and cleverly spin the truth about God. Their false messages might even *sound* credible. God’s people needed know the truth so they could avoid being manipulated and exploited by these false teachers, whose selfish agenda would be hidden behind an attractive façade.

Thankfully, God has given us ways to know the truth about Him, and we don’t have to become victims of bamboozlers who prey on ignorance. Through prayer, diligent study of God’s Word, and guidance by the Holy Spirit, we can discern what is false and avoid being lured away from the solid ground of truth.

Father, thank You for giving me ways to know You. As I remain prayerfully in Your Word, I trust You to guide me by Your Spirit into all truth. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Emergency Calls

I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me. When I was in distress, I sought the Lord (Psalm 77:1–2).

Scripture: Psalm 77:1–2, 7–19

Song: “I Go to the Rock”

If a fire broke out in my home, would I immediately call an interior designer to ask what style of carpeting I should buy once my living room is restored? Of course not! If I broke my leg, would I coolly contact an accountant and make sure I could afford a trip to the emergency room? That would be silly! In both cases, I would dial 9-1-1 and blurt out my problem so that a dispatcher could send the help I need.

In a time of desperation, the writer of Psalm 77 turned to the only one who could effectively help him in his time of need. In a raw, honest manner, uttering distraught words and acknowledging his complete dependence on God for help, the psalmist poured out his prayer. As the writer recalls God’s track record of mighty works, miracles, and leading, he knows he can trust God’s faithful love and mercy.

When we face a crisis, we might first turn to trusted friends, family members, or a minister for direction and advice. However, God is the one we can (and need to) call on first. He is ready to hear our unfiltered words and to direct us with unfailing love, providing the help we need.

Father, help me remember that I can call on You without hesitation, knowing that You welcome my prayers and have what I need. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Along for the Ride

God said to Noah, “Come out of the ark, you and your wife and your sons and their wives. Bring out every kind of living creature that is with you” (Genesis 8:15–17).

Scripture: Genesis 8:13–22; 9:11–13

Song: “In His Time”

Eight hundred and twenty-seven days. That’s how long it took between applying to go to the mission field and actually touching down in a new country. Eight hundred and twenty-seven days! My husband and I were middle-aged, self-supported, and had a resume of ministry experience. We thought the process would take . . . *maybe* six months, tops. This extended timeline was not what we had anticipated, and it felt like God’s timing had taken way too long.

When God called Noah to build the ark, God didn’t give Noah a timeline. Nor did Noah say to God, “I want you to make it rain cats and dogs for 40 days, then 100 days of light sprinkles, and I think sunshine is in order for 74 days after that.” Only God knew how and when His plan would be completed.

Proverbs 20:24 tells us, “A person’s steps are directed by the LORD. How then can anyone understand their own way?” When we remember that God has His own timeline for our lives, we can more peacefully wait for His plan to unfold as we follow His direction.

Father, thank You for including me in the work of Your kingdom. You are the one who knows how and when You’ll carry out the plans You have for me. Give me faith-filled patience as I wait for You. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Never Too Old

Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, “Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?” (Genesis 17:17).

Scripture: Genesis 17:15–22

Song: “All Things Are Possible to Him”

When I was young, an elderly gentleman at church met us kids with a stick of gum every Sunday morning. While he’s best remembered for this kindness, it was just one of many things he did to serve and bless our church community. He kept the grass mowed, made sure the water pump worked, and hauled trash away after our potluck dinners. He didn’t doubt God’s ability to use him, even as he reached old age.

As we grow older, we might begin to wonder, *Am I too old to be used by God?* We may not have the physical strength or capabilities we had in our youth. Abraham thought he and his wife were too old, and he *laughed* at God’s plan. Could Sarah bear a child at 90 years old? With God making it possible, she sure could!

Our age and abilities aren’t what matters. God matters. *Nothing* is impossible for Him. He will accomplish His will through us as we continue to trust and follow Him. His purposes in our older years may yield the most amazing fruit of our lives.

Father, help me trust Your plans even as I grow older. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Opening God's Grace Gift

[Paul, quoting David, wrote,] “Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them” (Romans 4:7–8).

Scripture: Romans 4:1–15

Song: “Amazing Grace”

Good Morning America aired the following lighthearted story: On Christmas Eve, while his family slept, a 3-year-old boy opened all the gifts under the tree. *Every single gift!* His parents discovered what he'd done when he woke his mother, asking for a pair of scissors to open the packaging that contained a toy he wanted to play with. Even as Mom and Dad hurried to rewrap the gifts, it was an easy transgression for them to forgive, and it's a comical Christmas memory the family will never forget.

Our own transgressions can be memorable as well . . . not because they're fun memories, but because they're shameful, painful, haunting, disappointing, or even devastating. We may find ourselves rolling them around in our minds when God would have us receive His forgiveness and move forward in His grace. Maybe we need to make amends with someone to move past where we're stuck. Maybe we simply need to receive God's grace. We're not perfect. We will make mistakes in life. There's no getting around it.

Because of Jesus, our own transgressions are not being held against us. God has provided tremendous grace for us and has blessed us with His forgiveness. Often, we just need to receive it gratefully.

Father, help me humbly receive Your grace and move forward in the peace of Your forgiveness. In Jesus' name, amen.

The Chinese Bamboo Tree

[Abraham] did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised (Romans 4:20–21).

Scripture: Romans 4:16–25

Song: “Wait on the Lord”

The seed of the Chinese Bamboo tree grows a root system underground for four long years until, in the fifth year, it finally finds its way above ground. Every day during that long waiting period, the ground must be watered and fertilized where the seed has been planted. That’s a long time to tend something without any visible results! But once the tree sprouts, it grows up to 90 feet (27.4 meters) in as little as five weeks. The persistent labor prior to this growth spurt is rooted in the belief that the seed *will* become the tree.

Abraham knew that God would be faithful to His promise, no matter how long it took. Some parts of God’s promise were fulfilled in Abraham’s lifetime. Other parts came to fruition long after he was gone. Regardless, Abraham trusted God’s faithfulness.

In faith, we plant spiritual seeds in the lives of others. Sometimes we get to see them spring up into saving faith. Other times we may not see results in our lifetime. But we know that Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10), and His Spirit is faithfully tending the seeds that have been planted.

Father, I will wait prayerfully for the seeds of the gospel to spring up to salvation in

Grieving in Leaving

The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you” (Genesis 12:1).

Scripture: Genesis 12:1–7

Song: “I’ll Go Where You Want Me to Go”

A good description of grief is that it’s really *love with nowhere to go* (because we no longer have our loved one). Death is often the culprit when we grieve, but there’s also a grieving in leaving. There may be times in our lives when God leads us to move away from family and friends. At such junctures, we may mourn, and our hearts may ache to go back, but we move forward, trusting God’s plan. Even long after we’ve moved, it can be challenging to remain far away from the ones we love most, but God may sometimes call us away to fulfill His purposes.

Abraham obeyed when God called him to move away from his home and people. As those who follow Christ, we too express our trust in God when we yield to His lead. There may be some sorrow in our hearts when we settle in a new place and sacrifice having our loved ones near. The heartache is because of love, and in time, it will grow less painful, even though our love remains the same.

God’s plans are perfect. Sometimes obeying Him brings heartache. But as we trust Him, making His purposes our first priority, our relationship with Him grows deeper, and we learn that following Him is always worth the cost.

Father, help me move forward in life wherever You lead, trusting fully in Your divine plan. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Tears Now, Joy Later

Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy
(Psalm 126:5).

Scripture: Psalms 125—126

Song: “For Those Tears I Died”

Most of us avoid crying. We hold back tears when we're overwhelmed and try not to cry in front of others. But tears were designed with purpose. In fact, researchers tell us we have three types of tears. *Basil tears* are in our eyes all the time, lubricating and protecting the cornea from dirt and debris. *Reflex tears* occur when irritants are present, such as onion fumes. Then there are *emotional tears*, which are the only kind that contain additional hormones and proteins. These tears are generated in response to sadness, grief, or joy. Researchers believe that allowing our emotional tears to flow releases toxins and stress, helping us to heal.

Spiritual growth may involve some tears. When our spirits are crushed, we can seek God for relief. Through experiences like betrayal or the death of someone we love deeply, we sow our prayers with tears, and in the process, we reap a deeper relationship with God. Today's passage reminds us that those who sow tearfully will later reap joyfully.

Perhaps you're struggling right now and it seems like the pain will never end, but it will. None of us can see it while we're suffering, but beyond the present pain, something wonderful is waiting. A day is coming when you will sing for joy at what God has brought about in your life.

Father, I will trust You, even as my tears flow. In faith, I thank You for the joy You have in store for me. In Jesus' name, amen.

The Telescope

From this one man [Abraham], and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore (Hebrews 11:12).

Scripture: Hebrews 11:8–12

Song: “This Is My Father’s World”

In 2021, NASA launched the James Webb Space Telescope. Once it reached its place in space, it began transmitting data, providing images in high definition. Researchers have discovered some quirky things, such as a formation of stars that looks like a question mark and a galaxy cluster that resembles a Christmas tree.

Numerous stars, countless as sand on the seashore . . . *of course*, God can bring innumerable descendants from Abraham. He can do anything. Getting new glimpses into outer space only confirms to believers that we have a marvelous creator. These wonders are an unmistakable sign of God’s glory. Who knows what God might do through such images of His handiwork? We marvel at what we discover in space, even as we inhabit our amazing world, which God has made with perfect order and precision.

Unlike humanity, God has the power to make something out of nothing. He formed humans from the dust of the earth. He brings the dead to life. His ways are perfect and beyond understanding. His creation shouts for us to see Him and know our maker. Through the lens of a powerful telescope, we see a smidgen of His magnificent creation. May each glimpse of His handiwork remind us who He is and that He is able to accomplish all that He has promised.

Father, I see You through Your creation, and I worship You. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Trust Tests

Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, “On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided” (Genesis 22:14).

Scripture: Genesis 22:1–14

Song: “God Moves in Mysterious Ways”

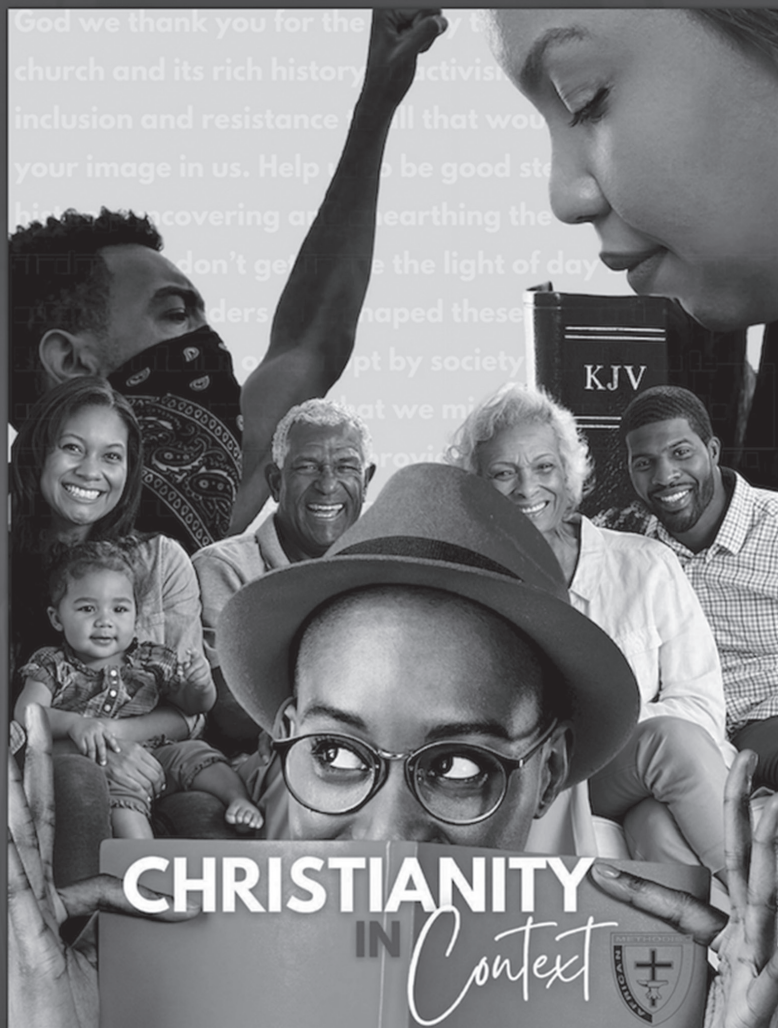
On a coffee table in my grandparents’ home, a large family Bible was on display. Beautiful artist depictions of the biblical text were dispersed throughout. One picture I recall showed Abraham hovering over his son Isaac with a large knife. It scared me as a child. At that time, I couldn’t comprehend the testing going on nor the foreshadowing it portrayed—a picture of a future event to take place—the sacrifice of God’s only Son, Jesus.

I couldn’t have understood then, either, how God tests us as His children . . . and provides for us. To be sure, God’s provision is always perfect. We may not see it that way when we’re struggling to make ends meet or when we’re distressed about some other situation that seems to threaten our security, but God will provide for us, usually in a way we could not have anticipated.

Trust tests lead us to a deeper understanding of God’s care for us as He proves Himself to us over and over again. And as we learn to trust Him more, we will begin moving through our tests with more faith and less stress, evidence that we have come to truly know Him as our faithful Heavenly Father.

Father, thank You for teaching me to trust You so that I can know the blessing of Your faithful provision. In Jesus’ name, amen.

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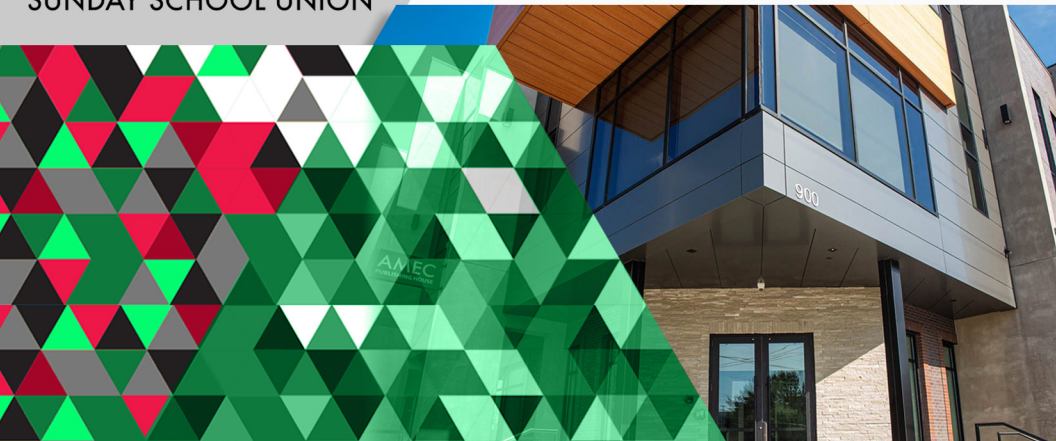
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