

# DISCOVER

THE DAILY BIBLE READING GUIDE FROM SCRIPTURE UNION

QUARTERLY

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# INTRODUCTION

What kinds of things do you find yourself doing for love? When I became a parent, I found myself doing all kinds of crazy things for love – rocking an ill child at all hours of the night; hearing the same songs over and over just because my children liked them; disciplining because I must, even when the sweet blue eyes were full of tears. Just imagine the love that our Father God has for us, a love that would sacrifice all for even those who hate and revile him. This kind of love leaves me speechless.

These upcoming readings are all intertwined with God's love for us and His call for us to love others. In 1 John we hear the Apostle John's injunctions for us to love one another, just as Christ loved us. In 2 John, the believers are encouraged to keep walking in obedience to God, which is our evidence of love to Him. In 3 John, Gaius is commended for his beautiful example of one who is faithful in his love toward God and his fellow believers. These letters to the early churches are all examples of how we as followers of Jesus can continue to walk in love, even as God loves us.

From John's letters, we travel back to the story and prophecies of Jonah. Although what jumps out in his story is the big fish, these four short chapters are all about the love and mercy of God. We see God's mercy extended to a vicious people who are the sworn enemies of God; we see Jonah's lack of love (bitter hatred it seems) for these people and God's loving guidance and discipline for His erring prophet.

From this missive of mercy, we go all the way back to the very beginnings of the world, where the God of the universe begins an epic love story with His creation, mankind, with whom He longs to live in an unbroken relationship. Through the fall of man and the broken relationship with Creator God, we receive God's promise of redemption – His promise that Love will win.

Through the unbelievable sin humankind engages in, the destruction of almost all of creation in the flood, and God's merciful beginning again with Noah and his family, we see the roots of God's redemption plan laid out. Even the scattering of the people at Babel leads us to dream of the day when all peoples will one day be brought together again from every tribe, nation, and tongue to praise the everlasting God.

As we draw closer to the Easter season, our journey of discovery leads us to the Gospel of Mark, to the beginning of Jesus' teachings. Throughout His life on earth, Jesus was the perfect example of God's love in action, teaching and exemplifying love in His every breath and movement, showing us how we must walk in love if we are to follow Him. As we journey on through the book, Mark will lead us to the climax of God's story of love and redemption, with Jesus, the God-man, making the ultimate sacrifice of love when He willingly lays down His life for His friends – and His enemies. Note: we begin with Mark 4 in order to highlight chapters 1-3 during the Advent season.

As we read over the next several weeks, let us reflect on the deep love of God and how we too can follow in His steps and live out our love for Him by sharing His great love with all around us.

## SCRIPTURE UNION'S BIBLE READING METHOD

- PRAY** that God would speak to you from the Bible passage.
- READ** the Bible passage slowly and thoughtfully, perhaps more than once.
- REFLECT** on what you've read.
- APPLY** what you learn from the Bible to the situations in your life.
- PRAY** again, using your discoveries from the Bible to guide your prayers.

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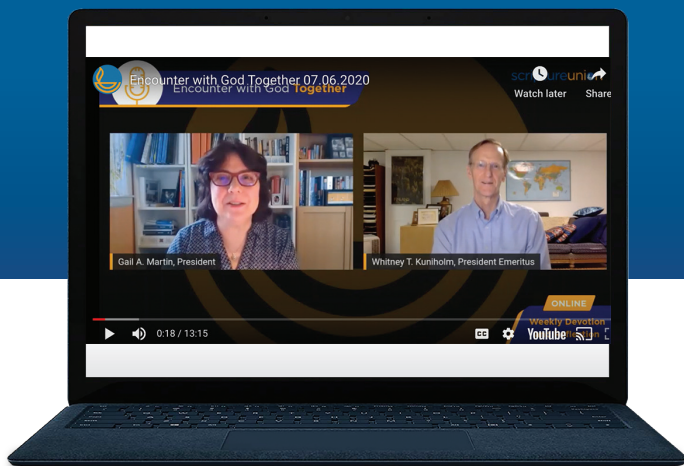
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Last year we launched an  
**online devotion and reflection**  
from the *Encounter with God*  
and *Discovery Bible Guides*.



Our new **weekly 10-15 minute recorded broadcast** is hosted by SU President Gail Martin and features special guests. Together, they discuss the selected readings of the week and share reflection and insights. Grab a cup of coffee or tea and join us for this special time of study as a community.



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## MEMORY VERSES FOR THE MONTH

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WEEK 1: “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.”

– 1 John 1:7

WEEK 2: “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!”

– 1 John 3:1a

WEEK 3: “And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love.”

– 2 John 6

WEEK 4: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.”

– Genesis 1:31a

WEEK 5: “In the image of God has God made mankind.”

– Genesis 9:6b



# LETTERS TO GOD'S CHILDREN

I remember at school, one day a friend of mine, not particularly known for his interest in religion, saying of the chaplain, “Now he’s a real Christian.” Jeremy, the new chaplain, was indeed a delightful and good Christian person. But I was struck that he had somehow impressed my friend.

It raises a question: what should Christian believers be like? This is what these short letters from the end of the New Testament address. 1, 2 and 3 John have traditionally been attributed to the apostle John, the brother of James, the fishermen sons of Zebedee, and two of Jesus’ closest disciples. John, living to a great age, perhaps into his nineties, writes to “my dear children.” It seems he was exercising a sort of “elder statesman” role in and around Ephesus and was held in great esteem and affection.

John wants his readers to have an assured faith in the true Christ: to be resilient and Christ-like in a hostile world. Vital themes – such as loving and knowing, believing and obeying – are intertwined throughout the letters. We may think John is at times repeating himself, but when he returns to a thought previously mentioned, he usually takes it a bit further, bringing a fresh challenge. His writing is attractively simple (often just monosyllables in English!), but profound. He shines a light on what we believe and the life we live. Jude’s brief pastoral letter echoes John’s words, encouraging us to persevere in hostile times.



# JESUS, GOD AND US

**PRAY** Heavenly Father, open the Scriptures to me today; walk with me.

**READ** 1 John 1

**REFLECT** **What does this rich passage say to you today about the Lord Jesus Christ, God the Father, the author – or yourself?**

It is sometimes hard to know how to begin a letter. John begins with his own experience of Jesus of Nazareth, whom he knew personally and lived alongside for three years. He saw Him with his own eyes, heard Him with his own ears and touched Him with his own hands. All Christian faith rests on the testimony of those first apostles.

John introduces this Jesus Christ not only as a contemporary, but also as timeless: He was at the creation, no less (1:1), and is now standing with the Father as our representative (2:1). Remarkably, John still enjoys fellowship with this Christ and with the Father through the cleansing of Christ's death (3,4,7), and so can his readers.

Besides the Lord Jesus Christ, another fundamental of the Christian faith is the unchanging nature of God. God is light (5). Wrongdoing and evil are always incompatible with God. If it were not so, would He still be worth worshipping?

So all Christians need to keep a realistic view of themselves at all times. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves (though probably not other people). But God will forgive and cleanse us if we confess to Him. Honesty about ourselves is another fundamental of the faith.

**APPLY** Do you have the tendency to minimize the sin in your life? Or do you often feel overwhelmed by the weight of shame? Ask God to help you view yourself through His eyes of love and righteousness.

**PRAY** Loving Savior, I need You to show me who I am in You. Be my truth, be the light that illuminates my heart.

Saturday, January 2, 2021

## I AM WRITING TO SAY....

**PRAY** “Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:9).

**READ** 1 John 2:1-14

**REFLECT** **Does the Light of Christ shine through you?**

“Lord, the light of your love is shining” (Graham Kendrick, “Lord, the light of your love (Shine, Jesus, Shine),” 1987). This is what John is wanting for his readers. Loving God, who is light, means keeping His commands, which means loving our Christian sisters and brothers. Encouragingly, if our way of life is following God’s commands and loving His people, we can be assured (“know,” 3, 5) that we are His.

Nine times in these fourteen verses John says why he is writing. He speaks of the “true light shining” and living in the light as we love others (8, 10). This is not theory. It is about our real day-to-day lives. Just as we might say “the whole room lights up!” to describe the warmth or humor a guest brings to a gathering, John expects his readers to experience the light of Christ as they keep His commands and care for each other.

John intends his words to apply to the whole range of his readers (12-14): the penitent, marveling at being children of God and forgiven; the mature older believers who have known God through many aspects of life; and those in their prime, taking on challenges for Christ, and winning.

**APPLY** Every chapter of this letter mentions Christ’s death for us (2). How can the central matters of the Bible become more central in our lives? Do you need to get your focus back onto Jesus and His salvation?

**PRAY** Christ, I want Your light to shine upon me and within me and through me to those around me. Be my light today.



## BELOVED HOME

**PRAY** I praise You, my Father, that I can come freely and boldly into Your presence because of Christ Jesus.

**READ** Psalm 84

**REFLECT** List what you love about spending time with God.

God responds lovingly to the small steps we make towards Him. Have you ever experienced walking to greet a loved one who has been absent? As you get closer, you break into a run and a warm hug ensues. It seems in Psalm 84 that the psalmist has broken into that run. He is so wonderfully desperate to be in God's presence, the distance between him and God has become intolerable.

The psalmist's outpouring of love for God is fulsome and of the heart. He understands God's grace. He simply desires to be in the courts of the Lord but for some reason cannot go. His whole being yearns for God (2), constantly calling upon or praising Him. He envies the sparrows, the Temple dwellers and pilgrims (3-7). The Jews loved attending the Temple in Jerusalem – God's dwelling place amongst His people.

The New Testament teaches that our bodies are the Temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16). He dwells within us and that is sacred space. When we trust His grace and forgiveness through Jesus, we too are running to God. It is trusting in God that brings blessing (12). This indwelling presence of God deserves, inspires, and requires celebration.

**APPLY** What could you do today as a celebration of being in God's "courts" (10)? Sing Him a song? Write a psalm? Offer Him the gift of your obedience?

**PRAY** My God, I rejoice in Your presence! You are more magnificent than words can describe. May I never take Your presence for granted.





## COMINGS AND GOINGS

**PRAY** Lord, open my eyes to Your truth, turn my feet to Your path, and harden my heart to the attractiveness of sin.

**READ** 1 John 2:15–27

**REFLECT** **Has someone close to you left the faith? How did that impact you?**

Have you ever been part of an organization where there were so many comings and goings that familiar faces were leaving and new faces arriving all the time? John does not want his readers to be disorientated by the comings and goings in their church. It was unsettling for them when some committed members deserted the cause. It showed that they never really belonged (19). In addition, opponents of Christ were joining (18). They were contradicting the truth of Jesus Christ (22), trying to lead people astray (26).

John's message is "stay on course" – "remain" (24, 27). That is why believers have been given the "anointing" (20, 27) – the Holy Spirit is at work in them, enabling them to be steadfast. The teaching they have received does not need to be supplemented by any counterfeit teachers.

But it is hard. We have to live in the world, which has some ugly characteristics (15–17). It continually feeds us selfish desires, deceptive images and pretentious claims. The good news is that the world is passing away (17). These characteristics don't have to influence us. Let us rather continue in Christ and get ready for the greatest coming of all (28).

**APPLY** Is it hard for you to "stay on course" (24)? Ask the Holy Spirit to empower you today to be steadfast and to help you recognize the truth of Christ compared to the deception of the world.

**PRAY** Father God, I praise You for Your beautiful creation. Help me to reject the world's ways when they are contrary to Yours.



Tuesday, January 5, 2021

## FAMILY LIKENESS

### PRAY

Jesus, I love You. I want to see Your face. Reveal Yourself to my heart today.

### READ

1 John 2:28 – 3:10

### REFLECT

**Pause and think about God's extravagance. The Bible uses words like "inexpressible" and "surpassing," (Ephesians 3:20).**

Lions and tigers may look cute and cuddly when they are small, but in time they will attack and kill without compunction. Their behavior is a key indicator of their predatory nature.

A key indicator of whether a person is a child of God is their behavior, says our passage (2:29). Christlikeness, doing what is right, goes hand-in-hand with having been born of God. So much so that, when ultimately Christ appears in glory and we, as children of God, see Him in His purity, we shall be "like Him." Meanwhile, we can be found making our lives fit for His presence (3:2,3).

The other side of the coin is also true. Habitual and characteristic sinning are incompatible with being a child of God. It indicates rather an affinity with the devil, who "has been sinning from the beginning" (3:8). All sin in our lives needs to be confessed and abandoned before it gets more of a hold on us. To conquer sin was precisely why Christ came.

To "lavish" (3:1) or "bestow" (KJV) are beautiful words for describing God's love in making us His children. Being born of Him makes a profound difference to a life. So profound that it will show in a person's behavior (10).

### APPLY

How does it make you feel to know that you will see Christ "when He appears" (3:3)? Excited? Anxious? Will you allow Christ to work in you until your greatest desire is to be more like Him?

### PRAY

My Jesus, I want to be like You, but I cannot make myself holy. I need You every moment of every day. Have Your way in me.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: GENESIS 9-11 / MATTHEW 4



## THE L-SHAPED LIFE

**PRAY** Lord, teach me to love people.

**READ** 1 John 3:11-24

**REFLECT** Is there anyone you have trouble loving?

Cain (12) messed up seriously (Genesis 4). He sacrificed to the Lord but he murdered his brother. Now, towards the end of the Bible, John is on a similar theme. Love for God and love for our brother and sister go together. They are inseparable. Christianity is always L-shaped, combining a “vertical” dimension (God) with a “horizontal” dimension (our fellow human beings).

Hatred has been in the world for a long time. Cain hated his brother, Abel, who had done nothing to deserve it. Even Jesus experienced hatred. John strengthens his readers for the hatred that may well come their way. They can take encouragement from their own concern for others, which is a sign of being on the side of life, not death (14, 15). “But do I really have eternal life?” asks a sensitive conscience.

Fortunately, it doesn’t depend on our conscience, but on God, who wonderfully is “greater than our hearts, and He knows everything” (19, 20). We can trust Him.

The horizontal challenge of these verses is unmissable. “Love one another,” “lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters,” have pity on those in need, love with actions and in truth (11, 16, 17, 23). It is a lifelong mission. As Jesus gave Himself for others in big ways and small, so do we.

**APPLY** Is there a charity helping our brothers and sisters in need locally or internationally you would like to renew or develop an interest in, and support?

**PRAY** Jesus, my Friend, teach me how to see others the way You see them. Teach me to love even when its tough.

Thursday, January 7, 2021

# DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING!

## PRAY

God, I ask for wisdom about living among ungodly people, some of whom are less than totally honest.

## READ

1 John 4:1-6

## REFLECT

**Whom do you know who is honest and true?**

"Don't believe everything you read or hear." Many years ago, I was talking with a former principal of a developing country's theological college. He thought that one of the main issues for his students was "who to believe and who not to believe."

That was a problem in the churches John was advising too. There were various skewed versions of Christianity circulating at the time, and, no doubt, some people found them attractive. But John urges discernment. First, don't believe every speaker, however plausible they may be. Listen to each speaker carefully; they may be anti-Christ (3). Secondly, look for those speakers who acknowledge that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (2, 3). In other words, a touchstone for all authentic Christian faith was and is Jesus Christ: both fully divine and fully human.

For ourselves, the Spirit of God in us is stronger than the spirit of the age or the spirit of falsehood (4b). The best way is to know God and to listen to Jesus' apostles, who, John says, "are from God" (6a). This will help us spot the "spirit of falsehood" (6b).

## APPLY

Whom do you allow to speak into your life? Do their words line up with the Word of God? How can you test their teachings against Scripture?

## PRAY

I need Your discernment on who to follow. Open my eyes to see Your truth versus the world's lies.

## SUCH LOVE

**PRAY** I am so thankful for Your love, my Savior and Friend.

1 John 4:7-21

**READ** **How did someone love you in a meaningful way lately?**

**REFLECT** This passage begins with love and God, and it ends with loving one another. Love is mysterious, but at its most profound it takes us to the cross of Christ and to God Himself.

Here we are at the heart of the Good News. The Lord Jesus is not only the Messiah (2:22) and the Son sent by God to be the Savior of the world (9, 14), but at the cross He is the “atoning sacrifice” for our sins (10; 2:2). This tells us much about God and love.

We know God is love. He is the upholder of the moral order of the universe. Why then would He bother about this world and its men and women who have broken His law (not a pretty sight)? Because God is love. He is like that. He is that. Indeed, all love comes from Him (7, 8). Supremely (10), in Christ’s death, He gave Himself as an atoning sacrifice, a righteous substitute for unrighteous people, the remedy to put us right with Him.

Wherever God is, love shows. But the cross is where God’s love shows itself fully. Wherever there is love like this, something of God shows. To sum up: God showed His love in His Son. And for God’s love for the world to be complete, it needs us to love one another (12).

**APPLY** How could you deliberately show love to someone today: new respect, understanding, support, affirmation, thanks?

**PRAY** Father God, teach me how to love those around me with a love that reflects Your heart.

Saturday, January 9, 2021

## THE LIFE OF GOD IN US

### PRAY

Lord, I ask for a heart fixed on You in this challenging world.

### READ

1 John 5:1-12

### REFLECT

**Have you ever struggled to live a godly life?**

Susanna Wesley, the mother of John and Charles Wesley recommended a book to them, which Charles in turn gave to his friend George Whitefield. These Christian pioneers were to bring much transformation to church and society in eighteenth-century Britain. The book was *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*. (Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, 1677).

This book's stirring title, though of its time, succinctly summarizes the new birth, or, as John calls it, being "born of God" (1).

What difference does faith in Christ make? God's life is in our life, which enables us to love God and His children. His life in us gives us strength and a desire to keep His commands (1-3). This life of God in us is eternal life, and comes through His Son, Jesus (11): "Whoever has the Son has life" (12). It also means victory! We can overcome the downward drag of the world, if we continue to exercise faith in Jesus Christ (4, 5), who is, of course, the Ultimate Victor.

No wonder John keeps pointing us to the historical Jesus. "The water and the blood" (6, 7) may refer to His baptism and death; these events witness powerfully that He is God's Son come among us as our Savior. God witnesses to us in many ways about His Son. We need to follow the evidence found in Him.

### APPLY

Do you find yourself trying to follow God's commands by your own strength? Take time to surrender your will to God today so that His Spirit can work within you to desire and to live a holy life.

### PRAY

Spirit of God, I need You. I cannot live this life on my own. I need your supernatural strength flowing through me today.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: GENESIS 18, 19 / MATTHEW 7

## PREPARING FOR GOD TO WORK

**PRAY** Thank You, God, for being so good to me!

**READ** Psalm 85

**REFLECT** **Recall a time when you experienced God's goodness.**

Once upon a time all was well. That's the gist of verses 1-3. In particular, God was generous to His people, forgiving their sins. But the psalmist speaks from a different place – probably a time of loss in Israel's life, perhaps when they were in exile. Hence the prayer "Restore us again" (4). Return us to what we once experienced. It is a prayer for reconnection with God.

The key insight of the psalm is that the current sense of distance from God is not because God is unfaithful. No, He promises peace (8). But something has separated God's people from the source of their joy (5, 6). The psalm ends with four verses celebrating God's gifts of faithfulness and righteousness (10-13). So the response to feeling distant from God is not to doubt His goodness, but to long to experience it.

Note the combination of honest assessment of problems along with confidence that God is good. This is typical of how the Psalms shape our hearts' desires, as we seek to "listen to what God the Lord says" (8). The psalm ends with rich, heart-warming imagery and life-giving verbs: kiss, spring, yield... It is a psalm for our emotions as well as our understanding.

**APPLY** As you go through the day, look out for signs of God's goodness in your personal life. Give thanks for them as you go.

**PRAY** Lord, may Your righteousness and faithfulness surround me every step of my way.

Monday, January 11, 2021

## REALITY

### PRAY

Lord, make the Bible real to me today. Show me myself as I really am and show me Yourself as You really are.

### READ

1 John 5:13-21

### REFLECT

**Is your faith genuine?**

“Keep away from fakes!” could hardly be a more suitable ending to this letter. All along, John has been wanting authenticity. He is looking for children of the true God believing in the real Christ, following genuine Christian teaching and showing practical love to their brothers and sisters.

John also wants them to have a sound confidence in Christ, and to know that the Son of God *has* given them eternal life (13) and *does* protect them in the world from the evil one (18). He wants their confidence to be in God who hears and answers prayer (14,15). Although some of the language may seem obscure to us, verse 16 begins with a wonderful promise to keep on praying for those who have apparently rejected the faith. God does hear. The faithful praying for a son or daughter or friend sometimes sees its reward decades later!

John can't resist a final warning against us kidding ourselves: all wrongdoing is sin, however Christian we may think we are (17,18). But the Good News is gloriously true. If we know the true Christ, then we know the true God, and this is eternal life (20), as Jesus said Himself (John 17:3).

### APPLY

Is there anyone in particular you know who has turned away from God in some way? Commit to pray for them this week and to keep your eyes open for ways to encourage them toward Christ.

### PRAY

My Jesus, I am so thankful that You hear my prayers. Touch the hearts of my loved ones today, that they may truly see You.



## LOVE AND DISCERNMENT

**PRAY** Lord, help me to know when to trust someone and when to be on my guard.

**READ** 2 John

**REFLECT** **Are you inclined to be too trusting? Or too skeptical?**

One good thing about getting an email is that you usually know whom it is from before you start reading. So it was with a letter in the ancient world. “The elder” here (1) is widely taken to be the apostle John, greatly respected and full of years, writing to a local church and its members, “the lady ... and ... her children,” (1). Disguising the names was perhaps a precaution in uncertain times.

What are we to do when God seems to command us to go in two different directions at the same time? We are commanded to live in obedience to the truth (4), and to walk in love (6). So, when visiting teachers came to the church deceiving people about Christ in a fundamental way (7), were the Christians to welcome them with love? Or, should they resist them to protect the truth of Christ?

John is clear: these teachers were influential and opposed to Christ (7), and should not be welcomed (10, 11). Resisting these wrong teachers in order that the church may “have God” and continue in the teaching of Christ (9, 10) was perhaps to walk in both truth *and* love.

**APPLY** Do you know any believers who are being pulled away by false teaching? How can you lovingly encourage them in the truth?

**PRAY** Jesus, help me to keep my eyes fixed on the truth of Your Word in a world so full of deception.

Wednesday, January 13, 2021

## HI GUY!

### PRAY

Thank You, God, for those You have placed in my life who have encouraged me in the faith.

### READ

3 John

### REFLECT

**Think back to occasions when you have benefitted from the hospitality of others, particularly hospitality from Christian people.**

This letter is more personal and more positive than yesterday's. "The elder" (probably John the apostle again) is writing to Gaius, who is a good friend (1, 2, 5, 11), possibly even owing his conversion to John (4). Gaius would be an asset to any church. His great contribution was offering generous hospitality to travelling teacher-missionaries. This was essential then for a church's well-being. For one thing, there was no New Testament in existence yet to provide teaching. For another, there were no decent B&Bs or inns where these itinerant teachers could stay. Gaius' role therefore enabled his church and others to hear the truth (8). John has known of Gaius' love and faithfulness to the truth, both first-hand and from the reports of others (4-6). It is good to commend Christian brothers and sisters who are doing well (3-5, 12). It strengthens them, and it teaches others what is good.

Diotrephes, however, was a nuisance. Self-promoting, he undermined the work of people like John and Gaius (9,10), even barring them from the church. Don't imitate him or be intimidated by him, was the message from John. You carry on in the good you have been doing (11).

### APPLY

Some people find giving hospitality harder than others. Is there a way in which you, like Gaius, might help meet the hospitality needs of your church? Remember, hospitality begins in the heart.

### PRAY

Lord, may I pass onto others the kindness that I have received from You.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: GENESIS 26, 27 / PSALMS 7, 8

## KEPT BY THE POWER OF GOD

**PRAY** Keep me today, Lord Jesus, by the power of Your might.

**READ** Jude

**REFLECT** Reflect on these words: **“When the road is rough and steep, fix your eyes upon Jesus; He alone has power to keep ...” (Norman J Clayton, “When the Road is Rough and Steep,” 1903–92).**

This letter begins and ends with God’s power to keep (3,24). Times were hard – and threatening to get worse for the Christians receiving this letter. Their very faith was at risk. They might succumb to pressure from certain interlopers in their midst, whose behavior was unholy and who denied Jesus as Lord (4, 5). Jude warns about the seriousness of all this. He likens it to various scandals and calamities in the Scriptures and other Jewish writings (5–16).

Jesus and His apostles had warned that divisive and unspiritual charlatans would infiltrate the church (17–19; Matthew 7:15). Jude urges his readers to take practical action. We need to contend for the faith (3). And, he says, whatever else is going on, pay attention to your own faith, holiness and prayer (20). Also, try to save any who are caught up, or wavering, in all the confusion around you (22, 23).

Jude’s readers might ask, “But can we keep going to the end with all this adversity?” Yes, he replies, God your Savior is able to do this – and how (24, 25)! He is shielding and steering you through your present ordeal – keep close to the keeper (21).

**APPLY** Do you know of any Christians throughout the past generations who stood firm in their faith? Research some people of faith and their steadfastness today to encourage you when times get tough.

**PRAY** Spirit of God, I need You now. May I walk in the strength of Your power.

# THE BIGGER HEART OF GOD

Bolting from one side of the known world to the other in a storm-besieged ship, being thrown overboard by desperate crew and held inside the belly of a huge fish... Jonah's fast-paced antics grab our attention.

But there is more to this story than a disobedient man inside a big fish. In Jonah we see God's action on the big stage of nations, whilst He simultaneously works in the heart of one man. It is not so much a story of Jonah, as of God's character and love for all those He created. Studying this book provides a unique window to understanding the desire of God's heart.

As we live in relationship with God, our faith will be reshaped and refined. Often this involves letting go of beliefs and values that hold us in old ways. This small but powerful book challenges both us and Jonah in just this way. We are asked to relinquish our "rules" that limit God and who we are becoming. God is in the process of transforming us into the likeness of Christ. Jonah did not run from God because he didn't believe in God. He fled God because he *did*.

Nineveh was not Jonah's first prophetic gig. God knew Jonah's faithfulness well. Jonah had spent years calling Israel to repent and believe. How God tracks alongside Jonah now suggests God's request was not only about Nineveh. It was also about the maturing transformation of His beloved, if reluctant, prophet. Such care awaits us also.

# WHEN ENOUGH IS TOO MUCH!

**PRAY** Have Your way in me, Lord Jesus.

**READ** Jonah 1

**REFLECT** **When do you feel God has asked too much of you? Recall your feelings and reactions.**

Jonah saw God's generous compassion when, as a prophet, he was sent to help restore Israel. God had required Jonah to work with Jeroboam, the wicked and unrepentant king of Israel (2 Kings 14:23–27). Now God wanted Jonah to challenge Nineveh to repent. Was even Israel's vicious enemy (Nahum 1:11; 2:12, 13) to be forgiven? Surely God was asking too much. Jonah could not stand in God's presence and disobey. Angry, he left.

So begins the beautiful story of God's love for all people, demonstrated in His pursuit of both Jonah and Nineveh. Neither deserve, but both need, God's forgiveness. Note God's extraordinary compassion towards Jonah – he ran, but God followed. Even Jonah is aware of God's presence and orchestration of events (8, 9, 12b).

At times I too have felt angry with God, feeling He was asking too much of me. My response was different from Jonah's. However, by maintaining a busy regime that kept God at a distance, I turned away from God just as much. I complained, but didn't want to hear. Like Jonah, I often need to change. Thankfully, as with Jonah, wherever we run, God follows. God's patient support lovingly untangles my wrong thinking. Then I see my part in the problem and change becomes possible.

**APPLY** How might you and God be at odds today? Is there something to learn? Know His deep love for you and pray that you will hear Him openly today.

**PRAY** God, it isn't always easy to obey You, You know how weak I am. Infuse Your strength into my life today so that I can honor You.

Saturday, January 16, 2021

## THE HOPE OF DESPAIR

**PRAY** Help me to walk by faith, not by sight today (2 Corinthians 5:7).

**READ** Jonah 2

**REFLECT** **Think of some times when you have been aware of God's presence in periods of despair.**

Jonah's physical and spiritual turmoil entwine. He is flipped and battered by the ocean and dragged to the depths. His spiritual journey endures wild, dark places of abandonment, distrust and despair. Jonah's departure from God was in his control. But his life became overwhelmingly chaotic. Some of us will recognize dark despair from our own or others' experience. The darkness is real, as it was for Jonah.

It is God in control now (6b). He acts instinctively from compassion and saves Jonah. Although harrowing, times of despair also hold hope because God is there. Jonah's ability to even remember God is evidence that God has remembered and is present with Jonah. It is the same for us. In the space of the fish's belly Jonah reflects. He calls out and God hears (2). Jonah emerges from darkness, shouting excitedly about the true God (9)! God, loving even small steps towards Him, builds on that faith. He lands Jonah safely on the beach.

Saved but not sorted, Jonah has renewed zeal for God's salvation. However, the same compassion that rescued Jonah is the very compassion Jonah would deny Nineveh. Transformation is God's continuing process for us of shedding and renewing thinking. The journey continues. We also can be grateful that God walks with us the whole way.

**APPLY** Do you know someone who is struggling to hold onto hope today? How can you hold out the hope of the Gospel to them today?

**PRAY** This world is so full of darkness, my Savior, but You are light. Help me to shine the light of Your Word to those around me.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: GENESIS 32, 33 / MATTHEW 12



## A PRAYER FOR HELP

**PRAY** “Hear me, Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy” (1).

**READ** Psalm 86

**REFLECT** This psalm is called “A prayer of David.” Could you insert your name there as well?

Most of the psalms around this point in the book of Psalms seem to reflect a time of trouble in Israel. Perhaps it was the time of Exile, causing people to long for God’s presence among them. Today’s psalmist is also reaching out to God for help. In this psalm there is a strong sense of confidence that God will hear and help. Overall the psalm is not specific about the nature of any of the problems. But that actually helps us as readers today since it means we can relate it to our own situations too.

Verse 1 describes the psalmist as “poor and needy.” This is also a non-specific phrase: does it mean spiritually needy, or is it referring to physical distress? The response focuses on the need for joy and forgiveness at first (4, 5), and then moves on to enemies who are “arrogant” (14) later. So the needs seem to be both spiritual and practical. This is common in the Old Testament where the spiritual and the physical were seen as two sides of the same coin.

Notice that the psalmist does not spend time blaming others for any misfortune. Rather, the prayer is to learn God’s ways so that a life of truthfulness can be lived (11).

**APPLY** Is God the first one you call on when you are in distress? Write down the phrase: “Tell God first.” Post the note where you can see it. Remind yourself to go to God first when questions and troubles come.

**PRAY** “Teach me your way, Lord, that I may rely on your faithfulness give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name” (11).

Monday, January 18, 2021

## ONE HEART TO ANOTHER

**PRAY** My God, I seek Your face today.

**READ** Jonah 3

**REFLECT** **What does God's heart truly seek from His world? How does your relationship with Him reflect this?**

Fresh from his rescue and renewed enthusiasm for God, Jonah obeys God, going directly to Nineveh. He completes God's task diligently (3-5). Astonishingly the Ninevites believe God's message of destruction. They jump to action, fasting and donning sackcloth to the last creature. The king urges people to change their evil ways (7, 9) only that they might escape God's "fierce anger."

Jonah and Nineveh are both obedient to God, but they fail to understand His heart. Jonah's anger (4:1) defies God's compassion towards Nineveh. Nineveh displayed initial outward signs of repentance; graciously God relented, but their hearts remained hard (Nahum 3:1-3). I know when my family "help" out of duty, compared to when their hearts are enthused. The former leaves me feeling isolated and resented, the latter like "we are in this together." God seeks more than dutiful obedience.

His purpose is to transform us into His own likeness, that we might share His heart of mercy and compassion for all people. God seeks an ongoing interactive dance of invitation, response; repentance, forgiveness; challenge, grace, and love... which form a relationship of deep purpose. Does that overwhelm you? That God desires a mature relationship with us? Praise God!

**APPLY** What would it look like for you to share more of your heart with God? Is it easy to tell God how you really feel? Take time to have a heart-to-heart conversation to God.

**PRAY** God, You know everything about me. Make my heart like Yours.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: GENESIS 37, 38 / MATTHEW 13

## QUESTIONS OF THE HEART

**PRAY** Open my heart to receive from You today, my God.

**READ** Jonah 4

**REFLECT** **Have you ever been angry with God? How did it resolve?**

Jonah is angry and out it comes! He had long suspected God's compassion extended to Israel's enemy. Nineveh had devoured Israel for decades (Nahum 3:1-4), yet God withholds His anger from them. Understandably Jonah is shocked, perhaps fearful about Israel's place before God (2). He wants only to die (3).

God's response is grace. A tender and poignant interaction unfolds. Anger has rendered Jonah's heart defective, closed to the enormity of God's purposes. God comes alongside. Patiently He enacts a "shade" drama (5), inviting Jonah to know His heart. God's questioning of Jonah's right to be angry points to God's own right (11) to love His creation.

We, too, get stuck in our "rules" about God. Recently a woman shared with me her desire to return to God. Having resisted until elderly, she felt hypocritical asking God to love her now. We discussed a parable of grace. She disagreed with mercy, until challenged to consider God's prerogative to make the rules. Refusing mercy would deny both herself and God. God is bigger than our small thinking. He offers compassion and anger where He wills. His grace extends even to His enemies (10, 11). This same God patiently challenges and teaches us, that we might know Him as He really is.

**APPLY** Is it hard to accept that God loves you completely right now with all of your successes and failures? Open your heart to God's work in you. Choose to live within His grace today.

**PRAY** Thank You so much for Your grace, my Savior. I praise You that You love me more than I can ever imagine.

# OPENING THE BOOK

Think of a movie's pre-credits sequence. Think of the prologue to a book or a film – set in a time long ago, in a galaxy far, far away... Think of the opening episode of a TV series. What do you see?

You see something spectacular, something memorable, something a little intriguing inviting you to keep watching or keep reading. Questions are asked whose answers will take time to arrive. Sometimes whole sets of characters come and go before the rest of the series settles down with longer-running more familiar characters.

There is a sense of a story beginning that someone – the author(s) – knows full well is going to develop across complex and multiple levels in pages and scenes and episodes to come. You relax and settle into reading/watching. You trust the storyteller to have reasons why we begin this way, but you know that the journey towards understanding will involve unexpected developments.

Welcome to Genesis 1-11! What we have just described is how these opening chapters of the Bible work. They are the “prologue.” The author (God) has an amazing big story planned, and though most of it won't involve Adam and Eve, or Cain and Abel, or Noah or Terah, the later characters to come will all in some way be related to these opening stories and their implications. Our chapters will raise more questions than they answer. But that's by design. It's to keep you reading on into the rest of the book. Ready?

## IT'S ALL GOOD

### PRAY

Thank You, God, for Your good creation. You are an awe-inspiring God.

### READ

Genesis 1:1-2:3

### REFLECT

**Have you created something you thought was “very good” (1:31)?**

Find a place to be completely still and silent for a few minutes. Then (and only then) ask God to reveal what He wants to show you as you read about the creation of everything.

Seven times we read that the creation was good – the seventh time it was even “very good” (1:31). God can rest peacefully on day seven with the job well done. Two observations:

First, God’s rest is the real climax of the story (2:2). Humans are very important in Genesis 1, and God blesses them and gives them a commission (1:28) – though did you notice that the first blessing in the Bible is actually on the first “living creatures” (fish and birds) in verse 22? There will be many chapters to come where what humans are up to is central. But here the focus is all on what God is doing, and the goal of all creation is to enter into God’s rest.

Second, the goodness of creation is good news, the first good news in fact. But let’s hear Genesis carefully. Creation is “(very) good,” rather than “perfect.” (There were different Hebrew words for these two classifications: so you had a good man, but a perfect sacrifice, for example.) Some readers imagine a perfect world in Genesis 1, but this can make it harder to explain how anything ever went wrong.

### APPLY

Do you find it hard to rest? Ask God to show you ways of “resting” in His presence today in spite of what may be on your to-do list.

### PRAY

I rejoice in You, my Creator God, Your works are wonderful (Psalm 139:14).



Thursday, January 21, 2021

## BEING TOGETHER

### PRAY

Thank You, God, that I was made for relationship. Meet with me today.

### READ

Genesis 2:4-25

### REFLECT

**Think about your relationships, not just with people but the whole world around you. Which are the most life-giving relationships?**

The beginning of Genesis is all about relationships. This is shown in the Hebrew words used. “Adam” means “human.” God relates to humankind (Adam) in chapter 1. Adam relates to the ground (the *adamah*) in chapter 2 (7). Today we also read how Adam being a man (an *ish*) is introduced to a new partner: the woman (an *ishshah* – the word-link works in English and Hebrew).

The point is that when God creates everything, He puts it into working relationships: God/humanity; human/environment; man/woman. We get two chapters to celebrate being made for relationships, before pondering later troubles.

The woman is his helper (18). When I help my sister put up a shelf, she is the expert, and I pass her the tools. When I help my son do his math homework, I am the expert, trying to show him that  $7 \times 7 = 49$ . To “help” can mean to assist from a position of greater or lesser capacity, or even just to be alongside. It is the same in Hebrew. Genesis 2 is not about the relative strengths of men and women. The woman’s help is a good thing, simply because what was not good was being alone.

### APPLY

Who could you help today, in any sense of the word “help”? Think if there is someone who needs encouragement in the midst of being alone, and seek them out.

### PRAY

Jesus, I am so thankful that through Your sacrifice I can be made in right relationship with God and with others.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: GENESIS 43, 44 / MATTHEW 15

## DID GOD REALLY SAY...?

### PRAY

Thank You, loving God, for Your forgiveness. I humbly come before You in repentance today.

### READ

Genesis 3:1-13

### REFLECT

**Is it easy for you to receive God's forgiveness?**

The incident in these verses is known as the “fall.” That’s not a word used in the story, but it is a pretty accurate label: everything falls apart. The man and the woman slip into fear (10), and passing the blame (13). When God comes looking for them on His afternoon walk – since He still desires to be with them – they hide (8). The relationships we noted between God and humans, and between man and woman, fracture very quickly.

Did the woman fail to get the command right (1)? Did the serpent tell a half-truth, about not dying there and then (4, 5)? How did this happen so soon after being placed in the good garden? Notice that Genesis 3 really does not answer these questions. A major emphasis of Genesis 3 is simply this: even in a good place, we can mess up completely, and quickly. The Bible will explore how lies, failure, and mistrust work out at great length in the stories to come.

Is there any good news here? Perhaps this story is designed to show us that while we do indeed mess up, God perseveres with us, and so our messing up is never the end of the story.

### APPLY

What is your go-to response when you fail? Do you beat yourself up? Give up? Try again? Run from God? Run to God? Take time now to bring your failures before God and accept His grace.

### PRAY

God, You know how utterly and often I fail You. But Your grace is enough for me. Help me to walk in the light of Your forgiveness today.

Saturday, January 23, 2021

## THE END OF THE BEGINNING

**PRAY** I praise You, my Lord, that You are in control, ever and always.

**READ** Genesis 3:14-24

**REFLECT** **How do you feel when you have to confront someone with the consequences of their negative actions?**

God takes action, and says three things. To the serpent: you are cursed (14, 15). To the woman: you will have pain in childbirth (16). To the man: the ground is cursed (17-19). In other words, all those good relationships in creation are now a whole lot more complicated. Working the ground will be difficult, and bringing new people into the world to create new relationships will be difficult.

Notice that God curses the serpent and the ground, but *not* Adam or Eve. There is some comfort in that, and also in God's caring for them in the post-garden world (21). He gives them "garments of skin" – so they will not enter the wider world naked or ashamed. He also stops them from obtaining immortality on this earth (24). Who, after all, wants to live with sin forever?

Genesis 1-3 affirms two fundamental things. First – the world is good. Second – the world is broken. Jewish and Christian faiths hold these two convictions in tension, and we won't understand our world rightly without both of them. It's not about being optimistic or pessimistic. It's about being realistic – about both good and evil.

**APPLY** As you go through your day, look for signs of the world's goodness and of the world's brokenness. Give thanks for the goodness, and ask God to intervene in the brokenness.

**PRAY** Jesus, help me to see the world through Your eyes, to see the beauty and the brokenness and to spread Your love through it all.



## A PRAYER FOR HELP

**PRAY** I praise You, God, that I am a member of Your family and a citizen of heaven. I glory in Your name.

**READ** Psalm 87

**REFLECT** **What has God's grace meant for you?**

In his most famous hymn “Amazing Grace,” John Newton marveled at the grace of God, which reaches out to undeserving sinners. Another of his “Olney Hymns” takes its inspiration from the third verse of this psalm: “Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God.”

Mount Zion is the hill on which stood the citadel David captured and made his capital – it became a synonym for Jerusalem (2 Samuel 5:7; Psalm 126:1). This psalm celebrates Zion as the city where God lives with His people, but verses 4 to 7 hold a surprise: people from Egypt (Rahab), Babylon, Philistia, Tyre and Cush will be included as citizens of Zion. Each of these have, at some time, been enemies of Israel, but here the psalmist sees the time when even people from these places will become part of God's people.

Isaiah also looked forward to the time when people from all nations would come to God's holy mountain (Isaiah 2:1-4) and become citizens of Zion. “... in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Ephesians 2:11-13).

**APPLY** Have you looked at others and judged them “too far gone” to be transformed by Christ? Take time now to allow God to search your heart and show you any distorted perspectives you may have.

**PRAY** Jesus, may I see those around me with Your eyes of compassion and mercy. I praise You that You accepted me into Your family.



Monday, January 25, 2021

## BLOOD BROTHERS?

**PRAY** Lord, uproot anything in my heart that does not belong to Your kingdom. Prepare my heart to hear from You.

**READ** Genesis 4

**REFLECT** Are you angry about anything?

Adam and Eve ate the fruit. Their son Cain murdered their son Abel (8). Things are unraveling fast. The unfolding story of Genesis seems to say: once you let sin in there is no limiting its impact.

No one knows why Abel's offering was preferable to Cain's (4, 5). We often don't know why different people are treated differently by God. What we do know is that we are responsible for how we respond to that. Cain is angry, and he plots to get Abel out into an unobserved field and kill him. Like all murderers he then has to lie about it (9). How he lies is particularly brutal: "Am I my brother's keeper?" But this is a question to which there was a simple correct answer: "Yes."

Is this sin bad enough to get God to give up on Cain? Here the correct answer is: "No." God marks him for protection (15). This is designed as a story for all times and places. Any of us could let anger take us over and lead us into sin. And still God would not give up on us.

**APPLY** Is there a family member with whom you are angry or from whom you are distant? Take steps today to apologize or extend forgiveness. Ask God to help you forgive others as He has forgiven you.

**PRAY** Thank you, Father, for my family. Help me to treasure them as You do and to pray for them faithfully.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: EXODUS 1, 2 / MATTHEW 18

# HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU!

## PRAY

Thank You, my Savior, for each day that You wake me up to live for You.

## READ

Genesis 5

## REFLECT

**Who are the most elderly Christians you know? What is one thing you might learn from them?**

In today's chapter lots of people live to a (very) ripe old age, have children, and then die (usually). I always hope that Methuselah had invested in birthday-cake candles...

Anyway, this would have all sounded very odd to ancient readers, for two reasons. First, because these were ordinary men (involved with ordinary women, noting verse 2). They were "sons of Adam," which meant "human" as we saw before. In other words, this is not a list of kings. In the ancient world every culture had its list of kings who were descended from the gods. But not Israel. Their holy book started with Adam and human sons. God's story is for everyone, not just royalty.

Secondly, this list emphasizes that each man died. Their ages may look huge to us, but compared to the semi-divine kings of other stories, who lived for 30,000 or 40,000 years, "969" was a remarkably small number. So again, God's story was for mortal human beings, just like us.

The seventh in line, Enoch, did not die. He walked with God, then and perhaps forever (24). Maybe that was a picture of what we all hope for in life. I'm not sure. One day I intend to ask God about it.

## APPLY

Genesis 5 was meant to surprise its readers, and remind them that God cared for everyone. Ask God to surprise you today by showing you someone unexpected for whom He cares.

## PRAY

Thank You, Jesus, for those You have placed in my life to encourage me in the faith. Help me to be an encouragement too.

Wednesday, January 27, 2021

## IT'S GONNA RAIN...

**PRAY** Thank You, Christ, for those who are faithful to You. May I follow their example.

**READ** Genesis 6

**REFLECT** **Think of someone you know who has stood up for God despite the pressure from those around them.**

First there is some strange business between the sons of God and daughters of men, maybe semi-angelic offspring not exactly reproducing according to their kinds. Whatever Genesis 6:1-4 is about precisely (and it has always been an obscure passage, even in ancient times), it seems to trigger God's recognition of the wickedness of the whole world (5).

The situation is so serious that God wishes He had not made humankind, all except for the righteous Noah, apparently (6-8). He decides to send a flood. The extent of God's decision to undo His creative work is extraordinary, and is based on God seeing that the human heart was continually evil and wicked (5). It is as if the flood is God's decision to repay destruction for destructiveness, although we will see soon that it does not end that way.

Meanwhile Noah faithfully builds an ark, for reasons he could not really understand. The idea that faithfulness sometimes means obedience to commands that do not always make sense is one important strand of the biblical story. The commands make sense to God; sometimes our job is simply to follow them.

**APPLY** Are there situations in your life where you wonder if God is asking you to say "no" to sin or the evil in the world? Ask God today to help you love Him more than your own desires.

**PRAY** God, I fail so often – forgive me. May Your Spirit work in me so that I will desire to follow You and have the strength to do so.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: EXODUS 5, 6 / PSALMS 13, 14

# OVERWHELMING

## PRAY

Prepare my heart to meet You in Your Word today, God, and to see Your hand at work.

## READ

Genesis 7

## REFLECT

**Have you ever lost something important to you? How did you respond?**

If you recall Genesis 1, God made our world by separating the waters above from the waters below (Genesis 1:6–8). In today’s chapter, He opens up the “floodgates” (quite literally): making holes in the dome above and the ground below, and all the chaotic water of the flood re-emerges and the world is lost (11). So where Genesis 1 was a creation story, this is a “de-creation” story (23). It is not just that it was a really wet season and rained a lot. This is a story on a whole different scale. The basic project of creation is deliberately dismantled. We will find out why tomorrow.

More or less all living land creatures are saved, some two-by-two, and some by sevens (or possibly seven pairs). At heart, God is overseeing the survival of all animals. Then through Noah, his wife, and their three sons plus wives, God is planning the survival of the human race too. Undeniably this is a chapter describing massive loss of life. Yet the emphasis in the way in which the story is told is mainly on the preservation of life. Even in the midst of judgment, there is life.

## APPLY

God’s ultimate desire is to bring restoration between Himself and humankind. How can you partner with Christ in this ministry of reconciliation? Read 2 Corinthians 5:17–21 and reflect.

## PRAY

Jesus, thank You for Your salvation. I am forever grateful that You are my “Ark” of safety. May I share this hope with others.

Friday, January 29, 2021

## NEW CREATION

**PRAY** Make me new again today, Spirit of God.

**READ** Genesis 8

**REFLECT** **Recall a time when you went on a long journey and spent hours cramped in a vehicle. How did you feel when you arrived?**

The chapter starts with the key words: “But God remembered Noah....” The turning point, as always, is God reaching out to humankind (and, in fact, all the animals too). So the “floodgates” get closed up again, and the water returns to where it came from (2, 3).

Let’s recap Genesis 1: separation of waters, creation. Genesis 7: re-emerging of the same waters, de-creation. Genesis 8: separation out again. What shall we call it? How about “New Creation?” This prologue to Holy Scripture packs in ideas and themes that get taken up later. Readers of the New Testament will eventually arrive at the idea of God making everything new in the New Creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). They heard it here in Genesis 1-11 first.

The other remarkable feature here is in verse 21, which you should compare with Genesis 6:5. Notice anything? The same reason is now given for God *not* to send a flood. We might think God would respond to human evil by causing disaster to come, but we see here that disaster does not wipe out human evil. Instead, it will be God’s love – His “remembering” – that makes all the difference.

**APPLY** You too are remembered by God, whatever your situation. Close your eyes and sit quietly in God’s presence. Then hold out your hands and imagine giving to God anything that is weighing you down.

**PRAY** I Praise You, Loving God, that You never give up on me. Thank You that I am a new creation in Christ.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: EXODUS 9, 10 / MATTHEW 21

# HUMANITY RELAUNCHED

## PRAY

Thank You, Creator God, for my life – for the ups and the downs that all point to how much You care for me.

## READ

Genesis 9

## REFLECT

**What are some of your earliest memories of life with God? Maybe as a child, or when you went through a conversion experience?**

New Year's resolutions rarely work. So God doesn't make them. Here we are right after the flood, restarting "Project Earth," and what does God start with? Not new resolutions, but a return to the old ones. Notice how verse 1 takes us straight back to creation in Genesis 1, blessing and filling the earth. Verse 6 also takes us back to the opening chapter, emphasizing the image of God in humankind. Like new creation, this is another idea that won't get taken up again until the New Testament, where Jesus turns out to be the true image of God (Colossians 1:15).

God makes a covenant with Noah, which means a binding agreement. God is committing Himself to Noah, and to humankind and to every living creature, in a profound way (8-11).

All this good news (blessing, promise, covenant) is to be marked in some way. God puts a "rainbow" in the sky (13). Although the word just meant "bow" – God has just said He will defend life (11), and the "bow" reminds us that God fights for all living creatures – the "bow" that we see in the sky is of course a rainbow. I think of Genesis whenever I see one. So it works!

## APPLY

Is God wanting to "re-launch" anything in your life? How might your early memories become prayers for new experiences with God?

## PRAY

Starting over is scary, Jesus. I don't want to fail or fall. Teach me to keep my hand in Yours and trust You for every step.





## OUT OF THE DEPTHS

**PRAY** I praise You, my Heavenly Father, that I can trust You.

**READ** Psalm 88

**REFLECT** **“Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, / But trust Him for His grace;  
/ Behind a frowning providence / He hides a smiling face” (William  
Cowper, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way,” 1774).**

“When I see God, I’m going to have a word with Him,” said a patient who had suffered greatly for many years. I said to him, “You may have to join a long queue!”

Psalms like this one show us that it is acceptable to tell God how we feel. There are psalms which are joyful throughout and ones which begin with a complaint against God and end on a note of praise, but here the psalmist seems to be surrounded by darkness from beginning to end (1,18).

However, this is not a cry of despair. The psalm addresses “the God who saves me” (1). The psalmist trusts God enough to pray every day (9, 13). Although, as a hospital chaplain, I cannot tell people why God allows them to suffer, they often appreciate honest prayer to help them trust God in the midst of it all.

The words at the beginning of the Reflect section come from the hymn “God Moves in a Mysterious Way.” The author, William Cowper, suffered from severe bouts of depression, but trusted that somehow God was at work.

**APPLY** If you are in distress, tell God about it, then reach out to another believer and ask them to pray with you. If you know someone who is going through a trying time, pray for them.

**PRAY** My God, life is not easy, but I trust Your heart. Hold me in the palm of Your hand.

## MEMORY VERSES FOR THE MONTH

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WEEK 1: “Then Jesus said, ‘Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.’”

– Mark 4:9

WEEK 2: “Jesus... said, ‘Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.’”

– Mark 5:19

WEEK 3: “Immediately he spoke to them and said, ‘Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.’”

– Mark 6:50b

WEEK 4: “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”

– Mark 9:24b



Monday, February 1, 2021

## WELCOME TO THE FAMILY TREE

### PRAY

Heavenly Father, put Your loving hand around my family, near and far, today.

### READ

Genesis 10:1-32

### REFLECT

**How much of your family tree do you know?**

OK, there are a lot of names here. Seventy to be precise, divided according to the sons of Noah, listing the descendants of Japheth (2), Ham (6) and Shem (21). They stretch out across roughly five generations, all the way to the great-great-great-grandsons of Shem – the 13 sons of Joktan (in verses 26-29). I'm not going to pretend that this is fascinating reading – it isn't.

What's it doing here? The tradition developed that these 70 offspring became the 70 nations of the world. It's actually Joktan's brother Peleg (25) whose family line is picked up in 11:16, and leads on to Abram (Abraham). So one of these 70 nations turned out to be Israel. (Look at Deuteronomy 32:8, 9 for an example of this idea.)

In a sense then, this chapter is a map of the world. Note verses 5, 20 and 31: each of these names indicates a nation with its own place and language. This is clearly quite some time after the flood. Is it designed to show that God is ruler not just of Israel, but also over the whole earth (32)?

### APPLY

Remembering that God is God of the whole world, choose a country somewhere else in the world and learn about their Christian population. [www.persecution.com](http://www.persecution.com) is a good place to start.

### PRAY

Sovereign Lord, I pray for my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ today. Strengthen them through Your Spirit and protect them.



## THE TOWER OF BABYLON

**PRAY** Holy God, teach me Your ways today. Show me how to honor You.

**READ** Genesis 11:1–32

**REFLECT** **Recall a time when you felt like God had totally disrupted your plans. How did you feel? Has anything good come out of it?**

We backtrack from yesterday's map of the world, to a time of one people and one language (1). "Shinar" is where Babylon was. Hold that thought. The residents decide to build a huge tower, up to heaven. God responds by peering down from on high and wondering what this little building project is. He comes down to have a look, and is not impressed.

The result is that the building project is stopped and people are scattered over all the earth (8). Well now... isn't that pretty much what God had in mind for humankind back in Genesis 1 – to scatter and fill the earth (1:28)? Seems like it took God's intervention, or judgment even, to get humanity back on track. This is another example of Genesis 1–11 showing us that God's judgment is for good.

The place was called "Babel" (9). Interestingly, this is the standard Hebrew name for "Babylon." Is there an echo here concerning ancient Israel's troubles with the later Babylonian empire? It might have felt like the Babylonians were building towers to the sky and doing as they pleased, but the God of Israel would intervene, and set them right... eventually.

**APPLY** Are you working on something that feels unusually difficult and you can't see the way ahead? Have you asked God for His viewpoint and agenda? Or are you trying to figure out your own plans?

**PRAY** Holy Spirit, I need Your wisdom today. I don't want to run ahead with my own plans, I want to follow Your leading and direction.

# GOD'S BIG PICTURE

Genesis is a book of beginnings, which extend beyond the creation story to God's revelation of His big plans for humanity. He will not remain remote from the people He has made, but will come to visit them. He will not issue law from on high without establishing a relationship in which His law can be explored. He will not show Himself in splendid form only to disappear, but will bind Himself by a special kind of promise to be the God of the people in the ordinary events of their lives.

When we revisit Genesis in the fall, we will learn that the series focuses mainly on Abram and his wife Sarai, whom God called to settle in the land of Canaan. On this adventure of faith they make great strides – and some colossal mistakes. They try to second-guess what God's plans are (never a wise thing to do), and sometimes seek to improve on God's way of doing things (always foolish!). But through it all, God is faithful to them as He is to us. This elderly couple receives the unlikely promise of a son, Isaac, and God proves Himself faithful. We will also read of Lot and his family. Abraham's nephew was a troubled soul who couldn't settle. But even as he lived life on the edge of obedience to God's way, God remained faithful to him.

The picture we have of God in these readings is of His covenant with us, which is firmly based on His steadfast and unconditional commitment to us, long before our fickle and conditional commitment to Him.

# GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISES

**PRAY** My Lord, may I take You at Your word. Speak to my heart today.

**READ** Genesis 12:1-9

**REFLECT** **Think of a time when someone made a promise to you, which they didn't keep. How did this make you feel?**

God's command to Abram to "go" was combined with a series of specific promises. These promises are tied together by a recurring note of blessing (2, 3). "Blessing" is shorthand for God's favor and protection. These verses explain that when God has blessed Abram, His protection and favor would spill over to others – first in Abram's immediate circle, but ultimately to everyone who will ever live on the planet! These are big promises for Abram to absorb, but he is convinced enough to pack up and go, as God had commanded (4).

It's important to recall God's promises. In fact, if we neglect to do this, our obeying of God and His commands may become little more than a harsh duty. It's not long before the trials and difficulties we face in following God cause us to become disillusioned or even cynical. Perhaps Abram's actions in building altars at Moreh (7) and near Bethel and Ai (8) are timely for you today. And notice too that having built these altars, Abram didn't stop his journey. He kept going (9).

**APPLY** Is there a promise God has made for which you are thankful? It might even be something as simple as "I will be with you always" (Matthew 28:20, CEV). Write down your promise and carry it today.

**PRAY** I Praise You, Lord, for Your precious promises. Your words to me are so sweet. I trust Your promises.



# CHANGING THE WORLD

Want to change the world? Me too. And I guess Jesus' impetuous disciple Peter might have signed up for that as well.

Mark's Gospel – the earliest of the four – may well have been written by John Mark, one of Jesus' followers. He became Peter's assistant in Rome. With much of the narrative sounding like a first-hand account, perhaps Peter shared stories of his time with Jesus, and John Mark wrote them down.

Maybe the fact that the word “immediately” occurs so much in Mark reflects the way Peter was and how he told the story. Just a thought. He was an “immediate” kind of guy, responding quickly and decisively, even though his hasty actions sometimes meant things went awry later.

In chapters 3 to 6 of Mark, we see Jesus as a kind of action man – here, there, and everywhere, teaching and healing, though there's much more healing than teaching. But Mark also shows Jesus to be *our* “action God,” as heaven – or God's kingdom – breaks in on earth, and people's lives and understandings are changed beyond all recognition. Ultimately, of course, Jesus' death and resurrection change everything forever.

So, as we breathlessly chase after Jesus around the countryside of these four chapters, how can we join Him in changing the world? By letting Jesus surprise us all over again in these well-known stories and by allowing them to impact our own relationship with Him. That's where the changing of the whole world must begin.

NOTE: we begin with Mark 4 in order to highlight chapters 1-3 during the Advent season.

## SOWING AND SEEING

**PRAY** Soften my heart to hear and absorb Your words, Spirit of God.

**READ** Mark 4:1-9

**REFLECT** **Imagine yourself in the crowd by the lake, straining to hear the story Jesus is telling. So what brings you to the lakeside today?**

Jesus is out in a boat. You've heard Him tell stories a few times before. You don't really get what He's talking about, but they're definitely not just tales with a twist. Maybe this time you'll get it? You've not heard *this* one before... Jesus tells parables to sort out those who are just going along with the crowd because of His popularity, and those who are genuinely seeking to understand about God (more about this in verses 10 to 12.) How about you?

You listen, captivated by Jesus' story of the farmer sowing seeds and reaping a harvest – or not. It's the kind of rural scene you see all the time here in the fields by the lakeside. The farmer in the story is doing what farmers always do – it's all very familiar, nothing unusual here.

But for those of us who long to follow Jesus, just *hearing* God's words isn't enough. We need to focus so that we actually hear them, then search (with the help of the Holy Spirit) for the deeper meaning in them. Finally, we need to do something about what they tell us (James 1:22-25).

**APPLY** Jesus invites us to “hear” what He has to say about life with God in His kingdom (9). Have you heard the word with your ears or your heart? Is there something God is asking you to do? Take the first step.

**PRAY** My Jesus, I pray that as I encounter familiar Bible words I will really listen, really understand, and really do what they tell me.

Friday, February 5, 2021

## NO GUARANTEE

### PRAY

Jesus, may I hear more than just words today as I read Your message to me.

### READ

Mark 4:10-20

### REFLECT

**How's the condition of your heart?**

As we share the good news of Jesus with our friends, families and communities, disappointingly there's no guarantee that people will "get it" and respond positively. What different responses have you seen when you've tried to tell others about the gospel?

Jesus explains people's different responses (15-20). Some don't understand at all, others start well, but then the worries and troubles of life "choke the word" (19). The way His own family and the religious leaders reacted to Him and His work must have been no surprise to Jesus (3:21,22).

For the rest of our readings in Mark's Gospel, in our "Apply" times, we'll try to be "good soil." We'll hear what God says to us and immediately seek to let it make a difference to our lives with Jesus. After being on today's campaign with Him to change the world, what difference will God's Word make in your life?

### APPLY

In the light of today's reading, ask yourself, what reason do I now have: to believe Jesus more wholeheartedly? To love and trust Him more deeply? To live His way more faithfully?

### PRAY

Jesus, I want my heart to be good soil. Give me Your strength to obey Your words when I hear them, to live my life to honor You.

# AMAZING LIGHT

## PRAY

Thank You, Jesus, for Your amazing light that You have brought into my life. Shine on me.

## READ

Mark 4:21-34

## REFLECT

**Is it easy for you to shine the light of Jesus?**

In the beginning God created light (Genesis 1:3). Then God gave us Jesus on earth – the light of the world. God reveals Him gradually, first to this crowd, then to that healed individual, then to those who “get” the message of the parables. The light mustn’t be hidden. That’s why it’s so important for those listening to Jesus to see the light and respond appropriately. Jesus’ parables point people to God, to Himself, to the light – and to the response for which God is longing.

The “spreading of the light” and the “growth of the crop” are God’s doing (27,28). However hard we work at sharing the good news with our friends, families, and communities, the results are not up to us – we can’t make kingdom growth happen. And however puny our efforts might seem, we can never tell what God will make of them (31,32). We need to be ready to be amazed.

I’d love to know what other parables Jesus told the listening crowd, wouldn’t you (33)?

## APPLY

Think about which of the three “Apply” questions from yesterday you can best answer, then do so in Jesus’ presence.

## PRAY

My God, I trust You. Help me to be faithful to shine Your light and I will trust You to be faithful to bring transformation.







## DAVID WILL RULE FOREVER

**PRAY** I give myself to You today, my Savior; speak to me.

**READ** Psalm 89

**REFLECT** **Have there been any times in your life when you have felt disappointed and let down by God? How have you responded?**

Verses 1–4 are a song of praise because of God’s promise to establish David’s throne forever. This is the bedrock for what follows. Verses 5–18 are a confession of faith focusing on God’s rule. The psalmist speaks of four different characteristics of that. Look carefully to find them. (“Rahab” in verse 10 refers to a sea monster and also possibly to Egypt, and is not to be confused with the Rahab of Joshua.) Verses 19–37 explore God’s promise to David that his throne will last forever, even if David’s sons disobey God (31–33).

In verses 38–51 the mood changes. The psalmist does not say what has caused this rapid change to a sense of God’s rejection and abandonment (46). Look carefully at these verses to notice the forms that God’s rejection takes. Notice also the honesty with which the psalmist prays. He does not hold anything back in his complaint against God.

Yet, despite the bitterness of the psalmist’s words, he concludes with a declaration that echoes his expression of faith in verses 1 and 2. He will continue to trust God and worship Him (52). What was your reaction when you read that verse?

**APPLY** This psalm is encouraging in the way that it expresses disappointment so openly, yet asserts trust in God. Take time to write down your true feelings to God right now, the good and the bad.

**PRAY** I praise You, Father, that I can tell You anything and You love me still. Hear my heart today and be with me.

Monday, February 8, 2021

## BEST BOAT TO BE IN

**PRAY** I am so glad that You are in my boat, Jesus. Be with me today.

**READ** Mark 4:35-41

**REFLECT** **At what times in your life, if at all, have you felt abandoned by God? Be assured of His presence with you now, as you read and pray.**

The tiny eyewitness detail Mark records should have changed everything – Jesus “sleeping on a cushion” (38). His disciples must by now have caught something of who Jesus is – mustn’t they? Especially with all the exorcisms, healings, parables full of insights about life with God and, well, with just being with Him. If He’s asleep and obviously unafraid, surely just being with Him should be enough. But they’re not thinking it through – the experienced fishermen know too much about the weather and are too spooked by what they see around them (37). His rebuke of them is because they’re responding as if He, God, has abandoned them (40).

Hundreds of years before the storm on Lake Galilee, the songwriter described events with startling similarity, attributing the sailors’ safety to “the Lord” (Psalm 107:23-30). Enjoy reading it for yourself. Only God can control the weather.

We’re in the same boat as the almighty Creator of the universe – Jesus, who is also our closest, dearest, most loving Friend. That’s surely the best boat to be in, any time.

**APPLY** Think about the three “Apply” questions again from Friday, February 5. In what way(s) has what you have read and reflected on today brought you closer to Jesus?

**PRAY** Jesus, I want to be closer to You. Show me how and give me the strength to take the needed steps.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: EXODUS 29, 30 / MATTHEW 28



# SWINE!

**PRAY** Speak to me today, Lord, and change me through Your Word.

**READ** Mark 5:1–20

**REFLECT** **Recommit yourself today to going on the adventure with Jesus to change the world.**

How much fear did you spot in all these events? The world of this miracle is beset with fear. Jesus leads His disciples into “unknown” Gentile land (1). Wouldn’t they have been more than a bit nervous? The sick man is afraid that Jesus is out to get him (7) and, for some reason, also fears freedom (10). The local villagers are fearful when they discover the previously-crazy man looking normal (15)! (You can never please *some* people!) “Get out of here, Jesus!” they shout, scared of being around the supernatural (17). Fear is everywhere. The only key players we *don’t* know about are the pigs!

Jesus, the only fearless one, breaks through everyone’s fear to meet, heal, and release the man who is incapable of leading a normal life and desperately needs Him. Walking with Jesus, ready to change the world, what are *your* fears?

**APPLY** Think yet again about the three “Apply” questions from Friday, February 5. How are the words and events you’ve experienced today starting to change your life with Jesus?

**PRAY** Change my life, Lord. I want Your transforming power in me. And I want to share what You’ve done with everyone around me.

Wednesday, February 10, 2021

## THE GOOD BREAK-IN

**PRAY** Holy Spirit, please guide me.

**READ** Mark 5:21–34

**REFLECT** **Search today's verses for reasons to love Jesus more dearly, believe Him more wholeheartedly, and follow Him more adventurously.**

So, as you've followed Jesus today, maybe even – once again – from the back of the crowd, peering over shoulders, what did He do for your faith?

Both Jairus (22, 23) and the sick woman (27, 28) take bold leaps of faith to get to Jesus with their needs, making themselves vulnerable, risking their reputations, possibly looking foolish if it doesn't all turn out the way they hope. And then the pivotal moment for the woman, when Jesus calls attention to her and suddenly it's a public drama (30–33). But somehow Jairus and the sick woman both “see” that, in Jesus, heaven is breaking in, and that life need never be the same again (34).

What have you risked to have faith in Jesus? What do you “see” but can't prove?

“What then is faith? It is what gives assurance to our hopes; it is what gives us conviction about things we can't see” (Hebrews 11:1, *The Bible for Everyone*).

**APPLY** Just as Jairus and the woman fall down at Jesus' feet (22, 33), adopt a physical position of humility, if you can. Pour out your heart to Him, in faith that He can mend your brokenness.

**PRAY** I am so thankful, my Jesus, that You see me. You hear my prayers and You love me so deeply.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: EXODUS 33, 34 / PSALM 19

# IN THE FACE OF DEATH

**PRAY** Thank You, God, that I can celebrate Your faithfulness.

**READ** Mark 5:35-43

**REFLECT** **When do you think was your faith most tested?**

In the face of the girl's death, Jairus' servants say, "No point bothering Him any more then" (35). Surely no one can fix death – it's the final full stop. But Jesus brings Jairus back to believing the impossible (36).

This is how it is when heaven breaks in – situations like this are turned upside down: unless you lose your life, you won't gain it (Mark 8:35); unless seeds die, there won't be new life (John 12:24); believe in Me and you'll live, even though you die (John 11:25).

As Mark writes, he hurries us on towards Jesus' death and resurrection. The events now taking place all point in that direction (39). But for now we stick by Him in His mission of dispelling darkness, pain, fear, and grief from the lives of those around us, especially those who don't yet know Him. Will you have the opportunity for that today?

Let's stay close to the One with whom dying is like the momentary passing of a cloud in front of the sun.

**APPLY** "Death has been swallowed up in victory." (1 Corinthians 15:54). Remember our three questions? How have you grown closer to Jesus today?

**PRAY** Jesus, You have the power of life! May the life that I now live in the flesh be lived out by my faith in the Son of God (Galatians 2:20).

## NO THANKS!

**PRAY** I am so thankful, my Lord that You chose me.

**READ** Mark 6:1-6a

**REFLECT** **So who's on Jesus' side in our passages? Are you on His side?**

Long, exhausting weeks of traveling, and it's time to return home to family and friends. You and I would look forward to knocking on doors, hugging those dearest to us, sharing wonderful meals, laughing together as we tell hilarious, colorful stories of our escapades. So imagine how Jesus feels as He heads home to Nazareth only to discover that His family and the other villagers are against Him – they just don't want to know (2, 3). Definitely no “local boy made good” story here. Their lack of belief stopped His mission dead in its tracks (5): “He *could* not...” No relationships, no faith, no miracles (4-6). The seed has fallen on hard soil (4:4, 5).

Even with clear evidence of God's love, provision and care all around them, including in the lives of Christians, some people we may meet still think Christianity is nuts. They choose to ignore God, and maybe even credit the love and care they receive to another source.

**APPLY**

Whom have you been speaking to about Christ? Pray for them today and ask the Lord to show you how to encourage them toward Christ – then leave the results in His hands.

**PRAY**

I pray for my family and friends who I long to become Christians – those who struggle to believe. Touch their hearts, Lord Jesus.

## TOTALLY INADEQUATE

### PRAY

Jesus, I want to serve You, even if I don't know all the steps. Show me Your way.

### READ

Mark 6:6b-13

### REFLECT

**Recall when you just started following Jesus, did you share the Good News of Jesus? Did you feel ready? How did God use you?**

Even though the 12 apostles still don't altogether "get" His teaching or the source of His power, Jesus now sends them out to extend His work (7). Incredibly risky? Jesus Himself gives them authority over evil spirits – they're only *able* because He *enables* them (13), not because they've passed their Grade 8 apostleship exam!

I was invited to preach my first sermon when I was about 17. It was in an informal service that a small team of us held at a retirement home. I felt totally inadequate. The sermon took me weeks to put together. I wrote it out word for word, and practiced it for days. I still have the sermon and it's *definitely* – should I say? – not even average, and it's far too long. Fortunately, most of the older people had nodded off before I got to the third paragraph! But the key thing is, someone trusted me to do it, and God did the rest.

### APPLY

It's never too late to step out of our comfort zone, join a team, and tell people the Good News of Jesus. Ask your local church or an organization like Scripture Union to see how you can share the Gospel.

### PRAY

God, I pray for those who don't know You yet, that I might have the chance to share Your love with one of them today.



## A QUESTION OF PERSPECTIVE

### PRAY

Lord, give me a fresh vision of how vast You are and how precious I am to You.

### READ

Psalm 90

### REFLECT

**Can you imagine just how big and grand and eternal God is?**

This psalm, attributed to Moses, is seen by some as his response to his sister Miriam's death and the complaints of the people in the wilderness (Numbers 20). Traditionally it was read at funerals because of the contrast between the frailty of humankind and God's eternal nature.

The psalm begins by focusing on the everlasting nature of God (1-6). Look at these verses and observe the different ways in which God's eternity is described. Notice in particular the difference between God's perspective on time and ours (4).

Verses 7-12 acknowledge the ways in which God's people have let Him down and are deserving of His judgment. The vastness of God is contrasted with the fragility of humankind. The request for wisdom in verse 12 provides a note of hope.

Verses 13-17 express a fresh perspective on life: a fresh sense of God's love, compassion, and presence once more satisfies (14) and the people once more prosper (17). However, that restoration of perspective is dependent on God's people appealing to His compassion for them (13).

### APPLY

Have you looked to other things to satisfy you, rather than looking to the everlasting Creator God? Take time now to lay your needs and desires before God – He cares for you.

### PRAY

Thank You, Lord, for Your greatness. Forgive me for the ways I fail to live as You desire (8). Thank You for Your steadfast love (14).

## GATHERING STORM

**PRAY** My God, I humbly come before You. Strengthen me today through this reading of Your Word.

**READ** Mark 6:14-29

**REFLECT** **What is troubling you today?**

Wouldn't it be great if this reading in Mark's Gospel ended on a high note? With Jesus being acclaimed everywhere He went and by everyone? Sadly, it's not like that.

Herod hears what Jesus and the apostles are doing (14). Some people connect it with the kind of thing John the Baptist used to do. John died, but maybe, through some kind of resurrection, he lives on? Flash back to how John died.

John had faithfully pointed people to Jesus. Then he kept challenging Herod to "do the right thing" in his marriage, according to what God wanted (17, 18; Leviticus 18:16). So Herod locked him away, even if sometimes "he liked to listen to him" (20). Then there's that party where Herod promises pretty much anything to Herodias' daughter, the dancer... (22, 23).

Out in the villages, there's good news for the locals as heaven breaks into their individual and community lives through Jesus' presence. In the seats of power, there's bad news as opposition to Jesus and His followers continues to mount. The cross beckons Jesus. It also beckons us to costly, tough discipleship.

**APPLY** Following Jesus includes following Him to the cross. Reflect on Romans 8:17. Have you hidden away from sharing in Christ's suffering? Tell Him about your fears today and seek His strength.

**PRAY** Jesus, I want to trust in You, but I don't like the suffering part. Give me the strength, grace, and courage to follow You always.



# ON THE ROAD WITH JESUS

I appreciate the simplicity and directness in Mark's account of the life of Jesus. He doesn't waste words, and he gets straight to the point.

Over the next three weeks we will be on the road with Jesus. We will join the disciples as they traverse the countryside following the Master and learning from Him. We will walk with them from Galilee to Tyre and Sidon; from Bethsaida to Caesarea Philippi; and finally from Capernaum to Jericho as Jesus heads to Jerusalem for the last time.

We will be able to eavesdrop on their conversations, see Jesus at work in a variety of settings, and notice how people responded to His teaching and ministry. Above all, we will be watching how Jesus trained His disciples. Like us, they were slow learners, but the Master never lost patience with them.

As you read, you may like to ask two questions: "What am I learning here about Jesus?" and "How does this challenge my discipleship?"

You may be very familiar with the Gospel story so ask the Holy Spirit to make it fresh to you, to show you things you have not seen before. But most of all, pray for the grace to work into your life whatever truth is revealed to you so that you are living out your faith day by day. That is the best way to show we are true disciples.

## YOUR PART IN A MIRACLE

### PRAY

Lord, I quiet my heart to meet with You. Let me feel Your presence today.

### READ

Mark 6:30-44

### REFLECT

#### How do you serve God?

It has often been said that “Without God, we cannot; without us, God will not.” God is the God of the miraculous, but usually He works in partnership with us to make the miraculous possible. Here the disciples are invited to cooperate with Jesus in something truly supernatural.

First He asks them to gather their resources. Although Mark makes no mention of the little boy who appears in John’s account (John 6:8, 9), they return with five loaves and two fish. This of course is not nearly enough to feed the crowd. However, Jesus takes what they bring and blesses it.

Next He asks them to distribute both bread and fish to the hungry crowd. How did they feel at this point? Perhaps a little foolish, but they obey. To their amazement, there is enough for everyone.

Then, as if to help them appreciate and fully absorb the miraculous nature of what had happened, He asks them to gather the leftovers – 12 basketfuls (43)! What a hands-on learning experience in the supernatural provision of God. And each had a part to play. The key lesson is this: God invites us to work in partnership with Him. He initiates, and we respond.

### APPLY

What do you have to offer God? A talent? Your time? The words of your mouth? Willingly offer it to God today so that He can use you how He will. Now, walk in expectation today of what God can do!

### PRAY

God I give what little I have to You. I know that with You, a little goes a long way. Use me for Your glory.

## INCREASING OUR TRUST

### PRAY

Jesus, I come away from the noise to meet with You. I give You my heart, my hopes, my dreams, my fears. Take me as I am.

### READ

Mark 6:45-56

### REFLECT

**Of what are you afraid?**

The disciples experienced the miraculous provision of God through the feeding of the 5,000, but failed to understand that He can be trusted in all circumstances. Hence in the storm they are afraid. Fortunately, Jesus has His eye on them.

Jesus *sees them* straining at the oars, the wind against them and their anxiety rising. It is easy to think in difficult situations that we have been forgotten, but that is never the case. He is aware of their plight, and comes to them, walking on the water.

Jesus then *joins them*, climbing into the boat. They are in this together, a wonderful reminder that Jesus wants to join us in our struggles and fears. Imagine that: Jesus is in the boat with you! Once we realize He is present, calmness returns.

As soon as they land, crowds run to meet Jesus. Jesus *responds to them*, making Himself available to them in their need. Never be afraid of asking Jesus for help, as if He might be too busy or disinterested. He always has time for us.

Here is a much-needed lesson in trust. The trials of life present us all with the opportunity to exercise our faith.

### APPLY

Is there a situation in which you are having a hard time trusting God? Ask God to help you wrap your mind around the fact that He really knows the best outcome for your life – even better than you do.

### PRAY

God, I really do want to trust You. I don't always know how to cast my cares on You and leave them there (1 Peter 5:7). Help me.

## RITUAL OR RELATIONSHIP?

**PRAY** My God, I want to worship You in Spirit and in truth today. Show me how to live a life of worship.

**READ** Mark 7:1-13

**REFLECT** **What is true worship? What does God look for when we worship Him?**

Many years ago, John Stott wrote a book called *Christ the Controversialist* (John Stott, *Christ the Controversialist*, Tyndale Press, 1970), a reminder that Jesus never shirked from conflict or controversy.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law were scrupulous in their adherence to the tradition of the elders, the many additional rules they had established beyond what the Old Testament required. They went so far as to allow people, under the pretense of piety, to say their money was devoted to God so that it need not be used for the support of elderly relatives (the practice of “Corban”). Jesus was very clear in His response. Such legalistic practice, devoid of heart commitment, was not acceptable to God. Further, they were placing human tradition above the Word of God. He describes them as hypocrites because He saw a discontinuity between what they said and how they lived.

This stinging rebuke antagonized these proud religious leaders. What an impression it would have made on the disciples! They were left in no doubt that true religion is a matter of the heart, of relationship with God, not the empty observance of rituals. The disciples were not sophisticated men, but they were sincere, which matters much more.

**APPLY** Why do you follow the religious traditions you observe? Is it to enhance Your friendship with Jesus? Evaluate why you do what you do.

**PRAY** Jesus, I want my Christian life to be about so much more than rules and observances. Help me to have a living relationship with You.

Friday, February 19, 2021

## HEART RELIGION

### PRAY

Holy Spirit give me an attentive heart and the insight I need as I ponder these words.

### READ

Read Mark 7:14-23

### REFLECT

**Do you see yourself the way others see you? Do you struggle to see yourself the way God sees you?**

Jesus warns against a religion that is merely external, based upon rituals and regulations. The faith He proclaims is more internal, a matter of the heart, and responding in faith and obedience to His word.

Just as ceremonial washing cannot cleanse us from sin, neither can the observance of strict dietary laws prevent sin from taking hold in our lives. Sin has its seat of power within us, in our fallen nature. None of us – including the most religious – is free from the possibility of sin, even of the most grievous kind. Given the right circumstances, anyone could sin in the ways listed here (21, 22).

True religion requires us to know ourselves well, and to depend on God's grace for the power to overcome our sinful tendencies. We must grow in self-awareness, recognizing the deceitfulness of our own heart, and understanding our motivations and desires. Such self-knowledge is not easily found for we are all prone to self-deceit and the denial that comes from pride. Sometimes such insight comes only through failure; often it requires feedback from honest friends.

The disciples were dull of hearing (18). Part of their future training will be to grow in self-awareness.

### APPLY

Read Psalm 139:23-24. How can you increase your self-awareness? Who might help you in this task?

### PRAY

Jesus, help me to be aware of the leading of Your Spirit today. May I seek out Your presence even in the mundane of my day.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: LEVITICUS 13, 14 / ACTS 8

## CHILDREN, CRUMBS AND DOGS

### PRAY

Thank You, God, for the space I have been able to set aside today to be with You.

### READ

Mark 7:24-30

### REFLECT

**When have you been desperate for God to act on your behalf?**

Most parents have experienced the panic that strikes when a child is seriously ill, and can empathize with this desperate mother (25). Although a Gentile, and a woman, she has no hesitation in seeking out Jesus, the Jewish rabbi and healer.

His response to her plea for help is enigmatic, even harsh, but He is testing her resolve and faith. Through the homely illustration of a family meal, He reminds her that His mission is first and foremost to the Jews. (His use of the word “dogs” here (27) refers to family pets but is still a reminder of the disparaging attitude of many Jews towards the Gentiles.) Why should He help a Gentile? Is He prejudiced like the others? How will she react to such a setback?

The woman responds with faith and humility. She believes He is merciful and is willing for any scraps of mercy: “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (28). Here is real, persistent faith and it moves Jesus to commend her. As a Gentile, she too can believe. The Gospel is for all, regardless of race. The only criterion is faith. When she returns home, she finds her daughter well. The demon has gone.

### APPLY

How convinced are you of the mercy of God? How determined are you when it comes to asking help from God? Lay your requests before Him and earnestly seek His intervention – He cares for you.

### PRAY

I am so glad that You care for me, Heavenly Father; give me a tiny glimpse of how vast Your mercy and grace are.

## GOD AND SUFFERING

**PRAY** Holy Spirit, my Comforter, sometimes the suffering in this world overwhelms me. Comfort my heart today as I meet with You.

**READ** Psalm 91

**REFLECT** **What trials are you facing today? This year?**

Why does a good God allow so much suffering in the world? The depth, the extent, the pain of so many could overwhelm us. And yet, if you scratch below the surface, there is tragedy in every life. Can these words provide comfort, even to the terminally ill (6), or in a war zone (5)? Verses 9 to 13 could be unhelpful if used carelessly. But overall this psalm expresses God's great care for us in the midst of our pain.

Read the psalm again, but this time applying it to Jesus. How would He have read this psalm? Harm and disaster (10) certainly came His way. He suffered tragedy and deep, deep pain. And yet it was not without purpose: in the very act of His death He crushed the head of the serpent (13; Genesis 3:15). And it was for us – it was so that sinners like us could rest in the shadow of His Father's wings (4). The cross doesn't tell us the reason for all the hard things God allows into our lives. But it leaves us utterly certain that God cares, and cares deeply for us. The God whose faithfulness can be our strength in the battles of life (4) can be trusted (2).

**APPLY** Take time now to place before God each of the difficult things in your life. Then give Him your "plan A" and "plan B" and give Him the right to carry out His plans in your life.

**PRAY** My King, You are "my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust" (2).



## HUNGRY MOUTHS, HUNGRY SOULS

**PRAY** Jesus, I love You. Teach me through Your Word to love You more.

**READ** Mark 8:1-13

**REFLECT** **Reflect on how you came to faith. What helped you to believe?  
On what does your faith rest?**

At a youth camp I attended, a skeptical young man said he would believe if that day he saw a bat. As we later walked on the hills, to our surprise we found a bat hanging upside down in a tree in broad daylight. The lad, however, remained skeptical. "It's just a coincidence," he said.

For those with eyes to see, miraculous events like the feeding of the crowd of thousands were clear indicators of the presence of the kingdom and proof that Jesus is the Messiah. They were also signs pointing to a deeper spiritual reality.

At no time, though, was Jesus willing to perform miracles on demand, simply to prove Himself. Here, He is moved by compassion for the hungry (2). That is the reason for the miracle. So when the Pharisees come asking Him for "a sign from heaven" (11), He refuses to acquiesce to their demands. He will not be a wonder-worker for the skeptical.

The disciples again have the privilege to witness a miracle first-hand, but can they see beyond the supernatural provision to the recognition that Jesus is in fact the Bread of Life (John 6:35)? That is the real question.

**APPLY** Are you allowing Christ to satisfy the hunger of your soul? Think about what things you go to when you are stressed. Are those things helpful to your walk with Christ or hurtful? Or just not best?

**PRAY** Jesus, You are all I need. Be all I want. Fulfill and satisfy my deepest longings as only You can.

Tuesday, February 23, 2021

## SPIRITUAL AWARENESS

### PRAY

"Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise His holy name... and forget not all His benefits" (Psalm 103:1-2, NIV).

### READ

Mark 8:14-21

### REFLECT

**Have you ever forgotten something really important? What were the consequences?**

When Jesus speaks about yeast (15), He is thinking of the insidious influence that unbelief can have. Just as yeast slowly has its effect on the dough in bread making, so the skepticism of the Pharisees will undermine the spiritual growth of the disciples if they allow it to.

There is a note of exasperation in the response of Jesus to the confusion of the disciples. With six penetrating questions (17-19), He brings them up short and forces them to examine whether or not they are learning from what they have experienced. According to Jesus, spiritual awareness requires three simple disciplines.

*Seeing*, not just with our physical eyes, but also with the eyes of our hearts; being able to recognize what God is doing in the circumstances of our lives. *Hearing*, not just with our physical ears, but also with the inner ear of the Spirit; being able to discern what God may be saying to us in what is happening. *Remembering*, that is keeping hold of the lessons we have learned.

These simple disciplines are key to spiritual growth. To make progress as disciples of Jesus we need to develop such reflective practices.

### APPLY

Take time to write down a list of five "remembrances" of what the Lord has done for you. Keep the list where you can see it.

### PRAY

Lord, I pray for the spirit of wisdom and revelation to know You better, that I may see and hear what You are doing and saying.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: LEVITICUS 21, 22 / ACTS 11

## SEEING CLEARLY?

### PRAY

Lord, only You know whom I will meet today. Make me aware of those around me so I can relate well to them for Your glory.

### READ

Mark 8:22-26

### REFLECT

**Whom do you impact in your day to day life? Think about it and you may be surprised at the answer.**

In one African country the customary greeting is not “How are you?” or “Did you sleep well?” but one of personal affirmation: “I see you.” In reality, we don’t always truly see the people around us, do we?

Without doubt the blind man experienced a real physical healing, but the fact that this healing comes in two distinct stages perhaps reminds us that physical healings have spiritual parallels. Mark seems to be driving home the point that we must grow in our spiritual awareness and that involves our eyes being opened both to God and to people.

We may see people without really noticing them. Perhaps they simply form the backdrop to our lives, rather like extras in a film, but we don’t truly engage with them. Sometimes we see people in a utilitarian way, for the function they perform, but never know their name or anything about them.

When God touches our eyes we begin to see others in the way that Jesus saw people – each made by God, created to know Him, and with value in His sight. Spiritual awareness involves being attentive to both God and the people around us.

### APPLY

Whom do you see regularly during your normal daily routine? Bus drivers? Baristas? Clients? How can you notice the “background” people today and share a smile or word of hope?

### PRAY

Forgive me, Lord, that I am often blind to the people around me. Open my eyes and help me to see them with Your eyes of compassion.

Thursday, February 25, 2021

## THE SHADOW OF THE CROSS

### PRAY

Meet me here, loving Savior, speak to me through Your Word.

### READ

Mark 8:27-9:1

### REFLECT

**When you became a Christian, what did you think it would involve?  
What is the difference between a believer and a disciple?**

After months of being with them on the road, Jesus now asks the disciples the all-important question (29): “Who do you say I am?” Having seen Him at work, and heard His teaching, do they now have the spiritual insight to recognize His true identity? It is a watershed moment.

Peter responds with the bold affirmation, “You are the Messiah” (29). At least he had managed to work this out when the others were less sure. It is this confession that leads Jesus to speak, for the first time, about His coming death (31-33). Yes, He is the Messiah, but He will be a suffering Messiah. This is too much for Peter to contemplate, and his contradiction of Jesus brings a stinging rebuke from the Master.

Not only will Jesus suffer as the Messiah, but all who follow Him will suffer as well (8:34 - 9:1). The call to take up our cross is a call to radical discipleship: the willingness to follow Jesus no matter what the cost.

We must beware watering down the terms of discipleship in order to make the Gospel more palatable to our generation. Wishy-washy followers will never win a hostile world.

### APPLY

When has the shadow of the cross fallen on your life? When has it cost you something to follow Jesus? What is Jesus asking you to forsake or “demote” in importance in order to follow Him?

### PRAY

Spirit of God, I need Your grace. I want to follow Christ, but I need more grace.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: LEVITICUS 25, 26 / ACTS 12

## A VISION AND A VOICE

**PRAY** My God, I want to see You. Come, Lord Jesus. Let Your presence surround me, Spirit of God.

**READ** Mark 9:2-13

**REFLECT** **If you wanted to confide in a few trusted friends, whom would you choose? Why is confidentiality important in friendship?**

Peter, James and John seem to have been those whom Jesus trusted the most, and He took them with Him up the mountain. There He was transfigured before them – they were able to see for the first time His true glory as the reality of His divine being shone through. Moses and Elijah appeared at the same time as well (2-4). It was an awe-inspiring moment, both beautiful and terrifying. No wonder the disciples were frightened (6).

As well as seeing this amazing sight, they also heard the voice of God (7): “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!” Here is a heavenly declaration as to the identity of Jesus – He is God’s beloved Son. Furthermore, here is the key to discipleship and spiritual growth – listen (with the sense of obeying) to what He says.

Even with this amazing experience behind them, the three disciples still cannot grasp what “rising from the dead” means (9, 10). It is as yet beyond their spiritual grasp. Jesus explains how the coming of Elijah was fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist (Matthew 11:14). Just as John suffered, so also will He. The difference is that He will rise again.

**APPLY** Thoughts of Jesus’ second coming may bring uncertainty, just as the disciples felt. But we can trust that Jesus knows the end of the story. Lay your uncertainties before Christ and seek to trust Him more.

**PRAY** Lord, show me more of Your glory. Help me to listen attentively to Your voice and be ready to respond in faith and obedience.

Saturday, February 27, 2021

## A FATHER'S PLEA

### PRAY

Hear me, Father God, listen to my cries and let me sense Your loving presence.

### READ

Mark 9:14-29

### REFLECT

**Have there been moments when you felt weak in faith? How have you come to terms with this?**

Earlier in Mark's Gospel, we met a mother pleading for her daughter; here we have a father desperately seeking help for his son. The boy has a severe case of demon possession. The disciples have failed to deal with the problem, so the father brings his son to Jesus. After some discussion, Jesus rebukes the spirit, and after convulsing him, the spirit leaves the boy and he is well again.

Two issues arise. The first is the importance of faith, for according to Jesus, "Everything is possible for one who believes" (23). Like many of us, the father has a mixture of faith and unbelief, but at least he asks for help to overcome his doubt. Faith always requires an object, and Jesus is the object of our faith. We are to believe in His ability to heal, and His willingness to help, even when our faith is small.

The second issue is that of prayer. The failure of the disciples is addressed by Jesus as a failure not of faith, but of prayer. "This kind can come out only by prayer," He says (28, 29). Intercession both strengthens our faith and increases our authority over demonic powers.

### APPLY

How does the Father's honesty encourage you? It is not the size of your faith that matters, but where you place your faith. Do you place your faith in your own strength? In other's words? Or in Jesus?

### PRAY

Jesus, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (24).



## NO DARKNESS IN HIM

### PRAY

Shine Your light on Your Word today, Lord, so that I can read with spiritual understanding.

### READ

Psalm 92

### REFLECT

**What are you thankful to God for today?**

This is a psalm of praise to God. But how did you feel about verses 6-11? Can we praise God for the judgment of the wicked (7)?

Our perspective gets skewed because we have a deep-seated presumption that people are good. Or not bad, at least. Yet there is *no* wickedness in God (15). Not even a hint of darkness. He is pure love and perfect faithfulness (2). God's holiness gets presumed to be a "holier than thou" sort of thing. But God's holiness is His purity. His holiness *is* His love. He is upright (15); it is humans who are the crooked ones. That's why the relationship between God and humans is broken. That's why evil must be destroyed, scattered, routed (7-11). It has no place in the world that belongs to the God who is love.

Yet we praise Him because He welcomes all who turn from wickedness to His love and lordship. Because of His great deeds of redemption, all who were once under judgment can be brought into His joy (4). Today, He invites us to praise Him for His love and His faithfulness (1-4). We are not to despair at the flourishing of the wicked (7), but to rejoice as we live our lives in His presence (12-14), built on the solid ground of His goodness (15).

### APPLY

Take time to praise God for His love and faithfulness to you in recent times.

### PRAY

For you make me glad by your deeds, Lord; I sing for joy at what your hands have done. How great are your works..." (4-5a).



## MEMORY VERSES FOR THE MONTH

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WEEK 1: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

– Mark 10:45

WEEK 2: “Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”

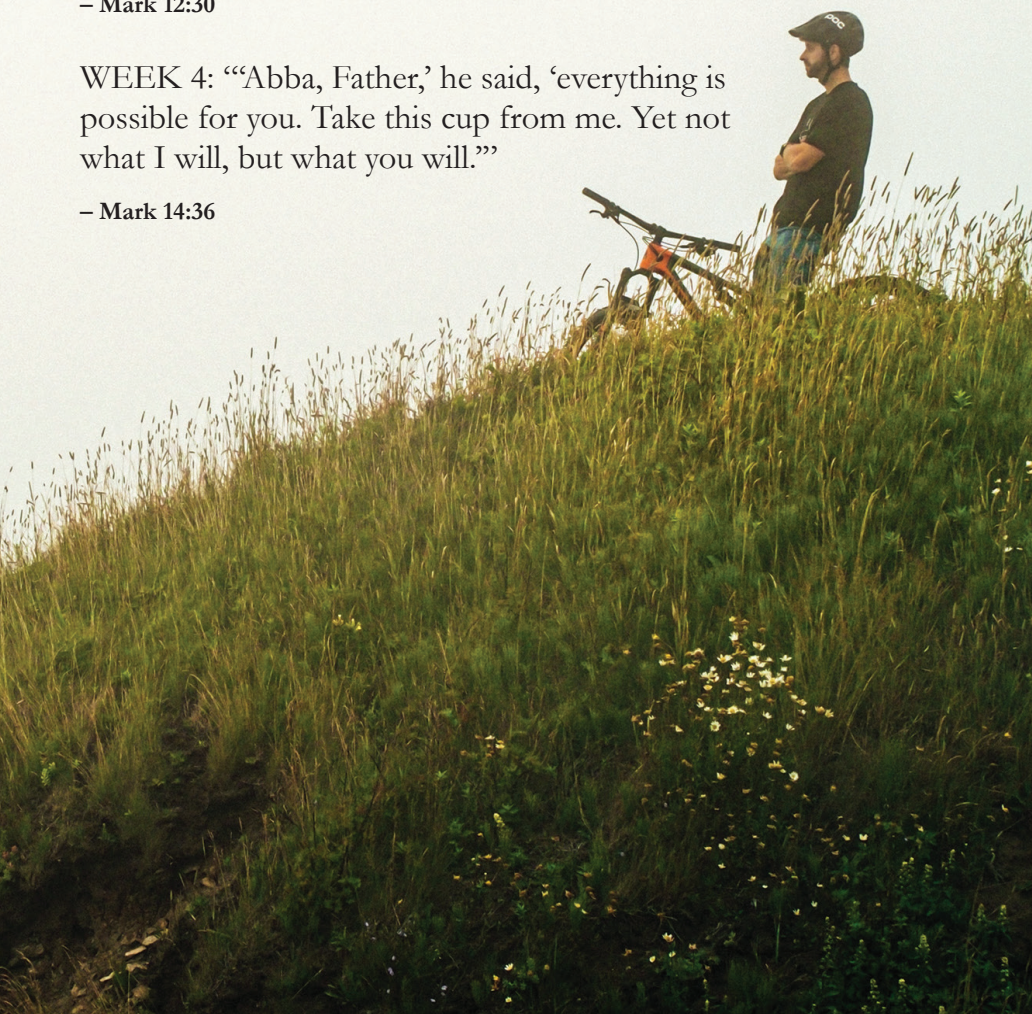
– Mark 11:24

WEEK 3: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”

– Mark 12:30

WEEK 4: “‘Abba, Father,’ he said, ‘everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.’”

– Mark 14:36



## THE CALL TO SERVE

### PRAY

God, give me understanding of what I read. Holy Spirit, make clear to me anything I don't understand.

### READ

Mark 9:30-41

### REFLECT

**When was the last time you intentionally served someone else?**

Here is a key lesson in the training of the 12 – the need to develop a servant heart. It is, in my opinion, perhaps the most crucial aspect of our character formation as disciples of Jesus.

The second reminder from Jesus that He will soon go to the cross, but rise again, once again falls on deaf ears (30-32). Jesus will serve us all by laying down His life for us. He is a servant par excellence and has given us an example to follow.

In the light of this, any squabbles about who is the greatest seem out of place (33-37). True greatness is seen in the way we serve others, even little children. In welcoming them we are welcoming Jesus Himself. What does that say about children's ministry?

Likewise, we should not worry about others serving God even if they are not "one of us" (38-41). They may not share all our views, but they can still do good. What matters is that the thirsty find refreshment and the needy are helped.

Seek to develop a servant-heart. How different our churches would be if we had more servants and fewer spectators.

### APPLY

What part does service play in your discipleship? How can you use your gifts, resources and time to bless others? Ask God for the grace to serve joyfully, even in the tasks that seem beneath you.

### PRAY

Jesus, help me to follow in Your steps, give me a heart like Yours and teach me how to serve even as You serve.

Tuesday, March 2, 2021

## SALTY SERVANTS

### PRAY

Loving God, please give me more grace to receive what You want to say to me today.

### READ

Mark 9:42-50

### REFLECT

**Not all the words of Jesus are comfortable to our ears. Which of His words do you find very challenging?**

Salt is used both to preserve food and to make it tasty. When used about believers it speaks about the distinctiveness of our Christian witness. Servants of Christ are called to live holy lives, and three ways are mentioned here.

*Be gentle towards children* (42). Young ones must not be bullied, abused or mistreated in any way. Anyone who leads the little ones astray sins in a serious way and will suffer for it. The mention of a millstone here is an example of Eastern hyperbole (of which this passage is full) – deliberate exaggeration to make a point.

*Be firm towards yourself* (43-48). More figurative language here, thankfully not to be taken literally (we would all be maimed), but definitely seriously. The point is we are to deal radically with any avenue that allows sin into our lives. We need to take care of our hands (what we do), feet (where we go) and eyes (what we look at). Who wants to find themselves shut out of God's presence?

*Be peaceful towards each other* (49, 50). Our true distinctive is to live well together, free from rivalry or selfish ambition. When we love one another our witness becomes really attractive.

### APPLY

Consider prayerfully these three pathways to holy living. How are you doing in each area? Is your life distinctive with the flavor of Christ?

### PRAY

Jesus, I want those around me to sense the presence of the Lord through my life. Make me more like You.

## A THORNY QUESTION

**PRAY** Lord, help me to concentrate today as I draw near to You. Give me the grace to focus.

Mark 10:1-16

**READ** **Ponder on God's heart of compassion today.**

**REFLECT** In response to the testing question from the Pharisees about divorce, Jesus reminds them of God's original intention for marriage in Genesis 1:27 and 2:24. From this basis we see that marriage is meant to be a sacred and permanent relationship (5-9). Even for those deeply in love, this does not come easily. Couples have to work at their relationship, seeking daily God's grace. Love is tested over the years, but love that endures is sweet indeed.

Jesus makes clear that divorce for the purpose of marrying another is the equivalent of adultery (10-12). But what of those who sadly find themselves divorced? The ideal of marriage is to be upheld in the context of human frailty. Divorce can be extremely painful but it is not the unforgivable sin. There is healing, forgiveness and the chance to start again.

The third mention of little children (13-16) reminds us that they are often the innocent victims of marriage break-up. Jesus welcomes them with open arms into His love and grace. His blessing is available to them, and to all who will come humbly, in child-like faith.

**APPLY** How can you send encouragement to those who are in a difficult season of marriage or who have been through a divorce? Can you pray or give a helping hand or just send a thoughtful note?

**PRAY** Jesus, you know how many people find themselves in difficult marriage situations. Bring healing and grace and wisdom.

Thursday, March 4, 2021

## RICHES AND THE KINGDOM

**PRAY** My King, open my heart to focus on eternity today.

**READ** Mark 10:17-31

**REFLECT** **Remember today that this life is not all there is. Indeed, the best is still to come.**

The man who approaches Jesus here would be considered an ideal candidate for membership of most local churches – he is enthusiastic (17), highly moral (18-20) and very wealthy (22). Yet Jesus sees that money is his god, and when challenged to give up his wealth he sadly turns away.

Wealth is not wrong in itself, but it can easily become our master, the reason it is hard for rich people to follow Jesus wholeheartedly (23). This causes the disciples to wonder, because it seems to set the bar of discipleship very high, indeed too high. “Who then can be saved?” they ask (24-26).

A person can only respond to the claims of Christ if God makes them willing to do so. This seems to be the meaning behind verse 27. Even discipleship is an impossibility without the grace of God.

For those who have left everything to follow Jesus there is the confident assurance of blessing now, and in the age to come (28-30). In the kingdom of God, status is reversed, and different values operate. Those who are considered “something” in the world are relegated; those who are “nothing” are exalted (31).

**APPLY** Think about your value system. How much value do you place on wealth and material possessions? How free are you to give generously and to share ungrudgingly what you have?

**PRAY** Jesus, it's so easy to hold onto possessions as if they were really mine, not a gift from You. Teach me to value what You value.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: NUMBERS 10, 11 / ACTS 17

# AMBITION AND THE KINGDOM

**PRAY** My Savior, as I read today, help me know how You want me to respond.

**READ** Mark 10:32-45

**REFLECT** **Remember that we are not only to hear God's Word but put it into practice as well. How good are you at the practicing part?**

Ambition is a good thing as long as it doesn't consume us or make us pushy and ruthless in our desire to succeed. Some of the disciples were ambitious in an unhealthy way, which is why Jesus speaks again about servanthood. In the kingdom, leaders are first and foremost servants.

A third reminder of the fact that Jesus is going to Jerusalem to die underlines the truth that He is the suffering servant, spoken of in Isaiah (52:13 – 53:12). In this context the unseemly arguing about position in the coming kingdom seems out of place. Jesus speaks of His coming death as a cup to be drunk and a baptism of suffering, reminding them that leaders must also be prepared to suffer.

Leadership in the kingdom is not like leadership in the world. The emphasis is not on power and position. It is not about bossing people about like a little dictator. Jesus might well have deserved privileged status, but He chose to humble Himself and offer His life as a ransom to set others free (45). That is why greatness is to be seen in how well we serve, not in what position we hold (43,44).

**APPLY** Leaders are servants first, and leaders second. What do you think that means? How might it be worked out in your life?

**PRAY** Jesus, I know that I can only lead as well as I follow You, my King. Teach me to follow You wholeheartedly.



Saturday, March 6, 2021

## A BLIND MAN SEES

**PRAY** Jesus, meet with me now, that I may know You more.

**READ** Mark 10:46–52

**REFLECT** **What are you hoping for as you come to Jesus today? What draws you to spend time with Him? What is the longing within?**

In this story we meet Bartimaeus. We are able to follow his journey from blind beggar to ardent follower of Jesus.

When we first meet him he is *sitting* on the outskirts of Jericho, begging as usual (46). It was just another day, and his expectations were few, until Jesus came along. Then we hear him *shouting* (47, 48), calling out to Jesus for help. People tell him to be quiet – he is a nobody and the famous rabbi has no time for him – but Bartimaeus persists: “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

When, to everyone’s surprise, Jesus calls him we see Bartimaeus *jumping*, throwing off his cloak in his haste to seize the moment (49, 50). He has no hesitation in *asking* Jesus to heal him. His request is specific: “Rabbi, I want to see.” Because of his faith he is healed (52).

Finally, we see him *following*, joining Jesus and the others on the discipleship road (52). He has gone from being a man with no hope to becoming a man with a purpose, such is the power of an encounter with Jesus. Happily that same transforming power is still at work today.

**APPLY** Imagine Jesus asking you today, “What do you want Me to do for you?” How will you answer? Like Bartimaeus, be specific and bold in your request.

**PRAY** “Rabbi, I want to see” (52). Open the eyes of my spirit to see You more clearly and to know You more deeply.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: NUMBERS 15, 16 / ACTS 19





Sunday, March 7, 2021

† MEMORY VERSE FOR THE  
WEEK: **MARK 10:45**

## THE LORD REIGNS

**PRAY** Mighty God, reign in my life today as I seek to know You more.

**READ** Psalm 93

**REFLECT** **Sometimes it's important to speak a reminder of a well-known truth. Speak out the first words of this psalm: "The Lord reigns" (1).**

The writer places before himself and his readers a number of revealing reasons why he is sure the Lord reigns. God's reign is secure because it never changes (2, 5). Human rulers come and go with each election, or on their death. God's rule lasts forever. His rule is strong (1) and holy (5), which means it is secure and cannot be toppled by any competitor. There are no legitimate pretenders to His throne.

The central part of the psalm speaks directly to the Hebrew people who were its first readers. In the Old Testament the sea is usually a picture of chaos (Genesis 1:2), darkness and judgment leading to death (the story of Jonah illustrates this). In this psalm however, it is the sea which has lifted up its voice in praise to God, acknowledging His much greater power (4). Remember that heaven itself is defined in the Bible by its lack of sea (Revelation 21:1). Chaos, judgment, and death will be distant and powerless memories in the light of God's perfect reign in Christ.

**APPLY** Write down some reasons from your own life why you are certain that the Lord reigns. Keep this list in a visible place to remind yourself of God's sovereignty on the hard days.

**PRAY** Gladly I submit my will to Yours. Thank You that I have been delivered from chaos, death and judgment because You are my King.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: NUMBERS 17-19 / PSALM 30

## THE COMING KING

Have you ever joined crowds to see an important visitor to your city – a celebrity or a national leader perhaps? Can you feel the excitement, hear the cheering? Are you standing on your tiptoes, straining your eyes to catch a glimpse? This is the atmosphere at the start of Mark 11, as Jesus enters Jerusalem.

Jesus' "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem is the event we celebrate as Palm Sunday, one week before Easter Day. The Last Supper, which immediately preceded Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, comes in Mark 14, shortly after our passage. So our readings for the next two weeks actually cover a period of only a few days. Like many others, Jesus and His disciples had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Only Jesus was aware that the symbolism of the Passover lamb was about to be fulfilled in His sacrificial death.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was the only time that He received public adulation fitting for a king. Throughout the rest of our readings He is being questioned; either by His disciples who want to understand, or by the Jewish leaders who hope to catch Him out and trip Him up.

As we read Mark 13, we will begin to see the returning King revealed: Jesus coming again in triumph. This time He will not just be riding a donkey into Jerusalem, but instead riding a white horse out of heaven for all the world to see (Revelation 19:11-16). He is the King of kings and He is coming again to reign. Let's await Him eagerly, like the crowds as He entered Jerusalem.

Monday, March 8, 2021

## DARING DISCIPLESHIP

### PRAY

I Praise You, my Good Shepherd who cares for me, Messiah who brings salvation, my Light of the world who guides me.

### READ

Mark 11:1-11

### REFLECT

**What are your favorite names of God to use when praising?**

I've always found the start of this story a little disturbing. Jesus asks two of His disciples to go and help themselves to someone else's donkey, giving them a story to tell if they get caught (2, 3)!

Why did the disciples obey? Well, they trusted Him. They had walked with Him for a few years now and seen the power of His words. They were getting used to Him doing strange things. The more we obey Jesus, the more we see His faithfulness and His power, the easier it becomes to obey.

When was the last time Jesus asked you to do something that seemed scary or weird? Perhaps it was offering to pray for a colleague or speaking up for what is morally right. Or maybe it was something specific, like giving a particular gift or calling someone at just the right time. It probably wasn't borrowing a stranger's donkey!

If you think about it, Jesus' "triumphal entry" – the only time in His earthly ministry that He was publicly praised for who He is – depended on the obedience of two ordinary disciples who were given a daring commission. As His disciples, it is our obedience – sometimes in ways that surprise or terrify us – that allows others to see who Jesus really is and to begin to praise Him.

### APPLY

Commit this week to start a new practice. Before you leave your house (or your bed!) ask God to show you who He wants you to impact this week or what actions for others He wants you to do.

### PRAY

Jesus, You came to serve, not to be served (10:45). Teach me to live like You, always looking for ways to honor the Father.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: NUMBERS 20, 21 / ACTS 20

## PROPER PURPOSE

### PRAY

Lord, may I come with eager expectation of what You will say to me and how You will move me today.

### READ

Mark 11:12-19

### REFLECT **What is your purpose?**

After I had been living in Romania a few years, I made my first trip to Hungary. I'd heard there was a well-known British supermarket there, so I was excited to find all my favorite products. But you can imagine my disappointment when the shop only stocked the same things I could easily find in Romania. No proper British teabags!

Jesus went to the fig-tree expectant but found no figs (12,13). Mark's comment about the season for figs might make you think that Jesus is being unreasonable to be disappointed at finding none. However, some commentators point out that fig trees can produce fruit all year, and certainly before coming into full leaf. The main fig harvest was around the time of the Passover. So it was perfectly reasonable for Jesus to expect to find figs that day.

It was also perfectly reasonable to expect to find the Temple full of worshippers bringing sacrifices, prayers and praise. Instead what Jesus found was a corrupt marketplace (17). So here is a kind of enacted parable. What does Jesus find when He looks at our lives? Are we fulfilling our God-ordained purpose? Are we bringing Him glory?

Do we have a great show of leaves – looking grand and impressive – but little actual fruit?

### APPLY

Take a look at the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22, 23. Is Jesus able to find fruit in your life? What fruit do you need to allow the Spirit to grow in you?

### PRAY

God, may the desire of my heart be to bring greater glory to Your name. I love You.

Wednesday, March 10, 2021

## FAITH-FILLED PRAYER

**PRAY** Jesus, I want to know You more. Teach me to trust You more.

**READ** Mark 11:20–26

**REFLECT** Remember some of the times God answered your prayers and give Him thanks.

Jesus demonstrates the power of His words by cursing the fig tree (20), then tells us that we can do more than that with our words (23).

What does it mean to have faith and not doubt (23)? Does God have some kind of cosmic “belief-ometer” that gives us our miracle when we reach the right level of faith? Perhaps you have been told by well-meaning friends that you need more faith when your prayer seems to go unanswered. Or, that an answer never came because of your lack of faith. But this sounds more like secular “positive thinking” than the “faith in God” that Jesus commands (22). To have faith in Him we must first know Him, and know that He is both trustworthy and mighty.

I’ve often found that it’s easier to have faith for someone else’s problem than for my own. That’s probably not a bad thing! I love to pray for others, believing that God will bring a miracle. But I’ve also had to learn to be humble enough to ask others to pray for me when I am finding it hard to believe that God will answer my prayer. Think, for example, about the friends of the paralyzed man in Mark 2:1–12. Jesus commended their faith as He healed their friend.

**APPLY** Think of someone whom you can ask to stand with you and support you in prayer. Ask them if they will pray with and for you!

**PRAY** God, I want to take You at Your word, but I don’t always know how. Show me how to walk step by step in faith.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: NUMBERS 24, 25 / PSALM 31



## IN THE HOT-SEAT

**PRAY** Jesus, may I see the world through the lens of Your Word today.

**READ** Mark 11:27–33

**REFLECT** **If someone asked why you are a Christian, how would you answer?**

It sounds a bit like an ambush, doesn't it? Jesus is walking around the Temple, perhaps meditating or praying, and suddenly a whole group of "chief priests, teachers of the law and elders" shows up (27)! There are a lot of people. And as they gather around Jesus, many more will come to see what's going on. The spotlight is on Jesus.

Jesus doesn't consider their particular question worthy of a direct answer. Instead, He asks them a similar question, but about John the Baptist's authority rather than His own (29, 30). These are the religious leaders – the crowds listening expect them to be able to tell them whether or not God has sent a particular person (32b).

Have you ever been in one of those situations where someone asks you a question about God and the whole room suddenly goes silent? Everyone is listening. You're on the spot.

Sometimes people ask us questions in order to catch us, or to make us say something that confirms their belief that Christians are judgmental or hypocritical. At other times, people may ask us questions about our faith because they genuinely want to know. The challenge we have is to discern the motive behind the question and to answer accordingly.

**APPLY** Do you know someone who just likes to argue about religious topics? Start to intentionally pray for them today, that God will touch their heart.

**PRAY** Lord, give me wisdom and discernment when I am questioned about my faith or faced with questions designed to trip me up.



Friday, March 12, 2021

## WHOSE VINEYARD IS IT?

**PRAY** My Savior, I praise You for Your glorious and amazing grace!

**READ** Mark 12:1-12

**REFLECT** Have you ever been to a vineyard? What was it like?

The Old Testament often uses the picture of a vine or vineyard to refer to Israel (Jeremiah 2:21; Ezekiel 15). Isaiah 5:2 uses language very similar to this parable to describe how God built a vineyard, fenced it, built a tower and dug a pit for pressing grapes. For Jews, brought up listening to scripture, the image was very familiar.

The leaders of the day knew that Jesus was telling this story about them (12:12). They were responsible for tending God's vineyard and for giving Him the fruit. Instead, they were often guilty of taking advantage of their position to gain wealth and prestige for themselves (12:38-40), dishonoring the God they were called to serve.

Some believe that verse 9 means that Christians now take the place of Jews as God's people. Others believe that Jews are still the chosen people of God. It's a complex and controversial issue.

Whatever your understanding of the New Testament position of Israel and the Church, there is a clear message to God's servants, whether Jew or Gentile. We are to play our part in producing good fruit for His glory. The vineyard itself belongs to God, we are just servants, each entrusted with a particular role in the fruit-producing process. We are called to tend the vines and make them fruitful wherever God has placed us: in our families, our communities and our local churches.

**APPLY** When others look at your life, what fruit do they see? Do you need to talk with the Heavenly Gardener about allowing Him to prune, water or fertilize areas of your life? Take time to talk with Him now.

**PRAY** God, I pray that I and my local church would produce lasting fruit for Your glory.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: NUMBERS 28, 29 / ACTS 23

## THE RIGHT ANSWER

### PRAY

Jesus, I want to love You more. Show me how to live for You through Your Word.

### READ

Mark 12:13-17

### REFLECT

**Do you know anyone suffering for their faith?**

It is hard for us to imagine the situation the Jewish people lived in when Jesus walked the earth. Though still in their own homeland, they were under Roman rule and had to abide by Roman law rather than their own. It was a struggle to know how to live out God's law without breaking the law of the land.

This is a daily struggle for many Christians around the world. Following God can bring us into direct conflict with religious or secular rulers. I lived in Romania after the fall of Communism and was privileged to hear the stories of many believers who had wrestled with this issue. Sometimes they had disobeyed quietly, under the radar – they tell many miraculous stories of how God kept them hidden. Sometimes they were caught and made to suffer.

In this instance, Jesus found a clever way of avoiding a straight answer. He knew that the Pharisees were simply trying to trick Him into saying something that could get Him arrested.

Those of us living in the West are increasingly finding that secular laws threaten our rights as Christians. Compared to so many in other places, we are not in any real danger yet. Now is the time to learn to be listening to God for wise responses in tricky situations.

### APPLY

Are there ways in which the culture has affected your faith in Christ? It's so easy to allow our surrounding influences to impact us. Ask God to show you His way clearly today.

### PRAY

My Lord, I pray for those who have to decide daily whether to obey Your law or the law of the land. Give them grace and strength.



## GOD DOES NOT FORGET

**PRAY** I thank You, God, for Your protection when I feel vulnerable.

**READ** Psalm 94

**REFLECT** **Remind yourself today, “God is on the throne.”**

Whatever the historical circumstance which produced this psalm, the struggles faced by the writer are made very clear – and they mainly come from fierce critics of his faith (5, 7). He doesn’t hold back in describing them, and their activities! They are variously proud, wicked, arrogant, senseless, foolish murderers (2–8). Evidently there is institutional opposition to the activities of God’s people, and the readers are feeling the pain of this. Confronting such opposition, the writer comforts his readers that God is still the Lord, and that the activities of these opponents are ultimately futile (11). God will have His way, even if for a time we live through costly trials (12–14).

Perhaps you feel at times that decisions taken by those who rule us do not reflect God’s standards or plans (20), but the psalmist is convinced that in such moments of uncertainty and even torment, God is faithful (18, 19). This is a solemn word to those who ignore God’s revealed will, especially if they legislate against it. It affirms renewed faith for those caught up in the middle of such opposition or persecution.

**APPLY** Do you know who your local leaders are? Find out today and commit to pray for them.

**PRAY** Savior King, I pray for those who rule over me, for their responsibility to legislate justly and wisely.

## NOW AND FOREVER

### PRAY

Great Physician, I pray for those close to me who are wrestling with sickness. Please touch them and give them hope.

### READ

Mark 12:18-27

### REFLECT

**What do you think heaven is really like?**

Again, the Sadducees try to catch Jesus out with a divisive question. If, as the Sadducees believed, there is no resurrection from the dead, then Jesus could not have risen. And if Jesus did not rise from the dead then death, sickness and sin still have power over us. As Paul says so clearly in 1 Corinthians 15:12-19, our faith is futile if the dead are not raised.

In the hustle and bustle of our twenty-first-century lives, it is easy to forget that this life is not the main deal: it is only a preparation. Our bodies may be decaying, we may be fighting sickness, but we are made to live forever! Let's lift our eyes off our present struggles and remind ourselves that one day we will be with Christ in glory!

From the hints Jesus gives in this passage, we can only guess at the details of what our eternal existence will be like. As far as marrying is concerned, we will be "like the angels" (25), but the Bible doesn't give us a very clear idea of what this means! What we *do* know for certain is that both they and we will spend eternity worshipping the Lamb who was slain and who was raised to life (Revelation 5:11-13).

### APPLY

Read Revelation 21. Take some time to picture not only what heaven will look like, but also what it might be like to live there. Ask God to fix your heart on His eternal.

### PRAY

Lord, thank You that You were with me in the past, You are with me in the here and now, and one day I will be with You forever.

Tuesday, March 16, 2021

## LIVE TO LOVE

### PRAY

My Jesus, as I come before You today, I consciously lay aside any worries and other distractions. Speak to me.

### READ

Mark 12:28-34

### REFLECT

**Do you know someone who is hard to love?**

When we hear the question “which is the greatest commandment?” our first thought might be to attempt to rank the Ten Commandments. But that is not what Jesus does (29-31). In fact, you won’t find Jesus’ response in the Ten Commandments at all. He first quotes Deuteronomy 6:4, 5, while “love your neighbor as yourself” is taken from Leviticus 19:18.

In some ways it would be easier if the Christian faith were a list of clearly defined commands. If we could just go through the checklist each week and mark off the things we’d done, we’d know for sure how we’re measuring up. Keeping all the Jewish feasts and sacrifices was challenging and costly, but you could walk away knowing you had fulfilled your religious obligations.

Jesus’ emphasis on the two commandments He quotes is another way of saying that what God actually wants is relationship. In Matthew’s version of this event, Jesus adds that “All the Law and the Prophets” are summed up in these two commandments (Matthew 22:40). Yes, there were a lot of rules and regulations in the Old Testament, but fundamentally they were all about having only one Lord and loving Him with all your being, then loving others too.

### APPLY

How are you doing at loving the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength? And what about loving others? Ask the Lord to highlight any areas in which He wants you to grow.

### PRAY

Father, these commands are so simple, but so difficult at times to live by. Change my heart so that I can love You with all I am.

## SEEKING STATUS

### PRAY

God, I pray for the leaders of my local church today. Give them everything they need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3).

### READ

Mark 12:35–40

### REFLECT

**Have you ever found yourself doing things just so people would see you do them?**

After all the times the religious leaders have tried to catch Him out with hard questions, Jesus asks one of His own (35–37). There is no record of anyone attempting to give a serious answer. But I'm not surprised that the crowd enjoyed it (37).

I don't think Jesus was out to humiliate the teachers of the law (35) by giving clever responses to their questions and then catching them with a few difficult questions of His own (35–37). I'm sure He genuinely hoped that some would see the truth of what He was saying. At the same time, though, He had to warn the crowd that their leaders were not setting a good example (38–40). Those who claim to speak for God carry a great responsibility (40b). It is not just their words and beliefs that matter, but also their actions (40a) and motivations (38, 39).

Whatever the nature of our ministry involvement, we have something to learn here. We are not to seek public acclaim. If we serve and pray in humility, God has promised to “lift us up” (James 4:10, 1 Peter 5:6, 7). However, that is in His way and His time, and may not be anything like what we had imagined.

### APPLY

Read Matthew 6:6. Take time to do just that today. Find a quiet place to make into your prayer room and lift your heart up to God.

### PRAY

Jesus, I want to know You more, not for any acclamation or reward, but just for the reward of knowing You.

Thursday, March 18, 2021

## GIVING THAT HURTS

### PRAY

I thank You, Lord, for the many ways in which You have blessed me. I thank You for...

### READ

Mark 12:41-44

### REFLECT

**What do you currently give to God of your possessions?**

This story is challenging for those of us who live in the prosperous West. Most of us have never known what it is to give in a way that hurts. We often give to our churches directly from our bank accounts, which is good in its own way, but distances us from the act of giving. We debate the intricacies of tithing, but rarely give enough to affect our diet, let alone leave us hungry.

Living in Romania for many years, I met Christians who said they were too poor to give. But I also met many who had experienced first-hand the faithfulness and loving care of God as they chose to give despite their circumstances. Giving more than we think we can afford is saying that we trust God more than we trust money.

Sometimes we feel as if our contribution is insignificant – be it money or in other areas of life. But God's economics don't work like ours: Jesus said the widow had given the most (43). When we give out of our love for Him, He will take our meager gift and turn it into something amazing! Remember the boy who gave his packed lunch to Jesus? He probably thought he was risking going hungry that day, but instead he shared a feast with at least 4,999 others (John 6:9)!

### APPLY

One of my mentors once challenged me to try to “out-give” God. Can you trust that God will be faithful no matter how much He asks you to give? Openly seek His heart now.

### PRAY

Lord, please show me what and to whom I should give. Show me if its time to re-assess before You my regular giving.



# HE'S COMING!

**PRAY** My Lord, I pray for those affected by wars and natural disasters. Let them know of Your presence and comfort.

**READ** Mark 13:1-27

**REFLECT** **Is it hard for you to stand firm when people treat you poorly because of your faith?**

I wonder if the disciples were surprised by Jesus' response to their question. They only asked about the destruction of the Temple that Jesus had just predicted (2) – and got a whole sermon on the end of the world! Some scholars believe that this chapter relates mainly to end times, but others consider that much of this passage is about the more imminent fall of Jerusalem. It is confusing!

What does come through strongly, though, is that we must be careful not to be deceived (5, 9, 23). When Jesus does return, it will be obvious to all (26).

Many have tried to apply this and other scriptures about Jesus' second coming to things going on in the world. Christians have been doing this for two thousand years and they haven't been right yet! In the days of the internet and 24-hour news, we hear of more "wars and rumors of wars" (7) than ever before. There are earthquakes, famines and all manner of natural disasters (8). We live in uncertain times.

We also face opposition. Standing firm as a Christian is becoming harder and more costly (9-13). We must remember that we have hope; one day the suffering will end and Jesus will return and take us to spend eternity with Him (26,27).

**APPLY** Regardless of when the world is ending, even our ordinary walk with God is not always easy. What are you struggling with? Write it down, crumple up the paper, and choose to give the issue to God.

**PRAY** King Jesus, please give me the grace to stand firm when my faith is challenged.

Saturday, March 20, 2021

## WIDE-AWAKE WAITING

**PRAY** I praise You, Lord, for walking with me in this past week. I need You every moment.

**READ** Mark 13:28–37

**REFLECT** How would you live today if Jesus were to return tomorrow?

Jesus continues His description of the end times, now telling us not just what will happen but what we should do about it. First, we are to watch the signs (29), but be aware that we cannot know the precise timing (32). Secondly, we are to live as if He might come at any moment (33–37).

If Jesus was telling a parable like this (34–36) today, He might set it in a school classroom. Do you remember what would happen when the teacher left the room? Did everyone carry on working quietly? And do you remember the scramble to get back to your place, pen in hand and head down, as the teacher returned?

So what does it mean to “watch?” Obviously we can’t literally never sleep (36), but this passage does mean not postponing changes that we know God wants in our lives. Perhaps there’s a persistent sin that we keep telling ourselves we’ll deal with next week, when we’re not so tired or stressed. Or, perhaps it’s something we should be doing, like praying, offering to help someone, or serving in some way in our local church. Being God’s servant doesn’t just mean that we get our ticket to heaven, then do what we like; our Christian living should be an active day-to-day service.

**APPLY** Refer back to the “Reflect” question. What are some immediate changes you would make? What is a first step you can take now toward one of those changes?

**PRAY** Jesus, I never want to take for granted that You may return at any time. Help me to be ready. Give me the strength to live for You.



## WAYS TO WORSHIP

**PRAY** I worship You my King. You are worthy of all my praise.

**READ** Psalm 95

**REFLECT** **Sing aloud a praise song or listen to your favorite worship song, and allow your heart to be refreshed by it.**

Psalm 95 is the first of a series of liturgical psalms, which were used as part of a choral work to celebrate the Lord's kingship and power as Creator. Initially, it is full of sound: singing, shouting and music (1, 2). God is worshipped as the mighty Creator of a majestic creation (4, 5). When was the last time you were part of joyful, exuberant worship? How did it feel? Are there elements of God's creation in the natural world that evoke wonder and compel you to worship Him?

Next, triumphant praise turns to supplication and submission (6). The imagery of a shepherd (7) reminds us of Jesus in John 10, and the comfort of His voice, protection and guidance. In what ways has God shepherded you and your community in the last year?

However, the psalm ends on a note of warning (8). Why and how do we harden our hearts against God? What can we learn from this psalm to stop our hearts from going astray (10) and rejecting the care, guidance, and discipline of the Good Shepherd?

**APPLY** Sketch an image that represents your way of worshipping God. It could be a person with raised hands or a part of creation that inspires you. Get creative! Use the reminder this week to worship God.

**PRAY** Lord, I sing for joy to You. I shout aloud to the Rock of my salvation. I come before You with thanksgiving (1-2a).

## THE SHOW MUST GO ON

Welcome to this series of *Discovery* as we walk with Jesus through the last few days of His earthly life. To most of us the storyline is familiar. What might be less familiar is how we feel about it and what the significance of it is for us 2,000 years on. Is it still relevant? Can the familiarity dull our senses as to what happened? Who is Jesus for us today? Can He save even us?

Three main themes run through our texts. Two are outlined on day one. In the statement “What a waste!” we are invited to reflect on the futility of it all, the loss of Jesus and what could have been. The narrative regularly throws up lost opportunities to change the world as Jesus walks nearer to the cross. The question “So how do we love?” calls us to reflect by observing how others loved Jesus... or didn’t, and how we go about loving Him now, 2,000 years on. What is our response?

The end of chapter 15 marks a transition and introduces an additional theme: “Believing what we see.” This is not just encouraging us to believe what we actually read, but looking and reflecting more deeply into the text and its significance. In this exploration, we discover that not even the failings of human nature could prevent God changing the world and bringing about a lasting transformation in the hearts of those who love Him through Jesus.

## WHAT A WASTE!

### PRAY

Jesus, I lay my life before You now. Let the presence of Your Spirit saturate me.

### READ

Mark 14:1-11

### REFLECT

**“But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ” (Philippians 3:7). What does this mean for you?**

“What a waste!” exclaim those observing the woman and Jesus. “The poor you will always have with you,” says Jesus, “She has done a beautiful thing to me.”

The heart of this passage is surrounded by evil intent (1, 2, 10, 11), and features the struggle between God’s kingdom and worldly values in the minds of the onlookers. Which is greater – a reckless, costly abandonment to love God, or the pursuit of personal wealth, even if for a good cause? The woman gave the most valuable thing she had for Jesus’ sake. She reflected Jesus’ own love for her by what she did. “She did what she could,” said Jesus, not what she couldn’t. The scene reveals what God considers of greatest value: a wholehearted outpouring of love for God – the God who first loved us (1 John 4:19). Contrast this with the worldliness of those looking on. Money has value, but the woman knows “money can’t buy me love!” And money loses value to us the moment we die.

So how do we love? Is our pocketbook the closest thing to our heart, as money seems to dominate our worldly culture? How balanced is our love of Jesus and our worldliness?

### APPLY

Which voice wins out? The one that tells you to lavish your love “recklessly” upon Christ? Or the voice that says to “look out for number one”? What might Christ be asking you to pour at His feet?

### PRAY

Lord, teach us to look out for times and opportunities when we can show our faith with reckless abandon, simply out of love for You!

Tuesday, March 23, 2021

## IT'S MY PARTY

### PRAY

Thank You, Jesus, for Your loving acceptance of me. I am truly overwhelmed by Your unfailing love.

### READ

Mark 14:12-26

### REFLECT

**Do I ever fear Jesus' rejection?**

Eating, for most, is one of the great pleasures in life. It is a great way to share ourselves with someone else – not simply in providing nourishing food, but sharing ourselves in conversation and getting to know others.

Our verses note that the disciples were “reclining at the table eating” (18), when Jesus comes out with His extraordinary notice of betrayal. Pressed, Jesus says it will be the “one who dips bread into the bowl with me” (20). It is significant that Jesus does not name the betrayer. He has no need as He lays out the consequences before him, almost as a warning.

And yet, “While they were eating...” (22). The meal continues. Despite His betrayer being present Jesus turns no one away and everyone still eats at His table. All of them knew they fell short of Jesus' godly standards. The betrayer could have been any one of them, and yet Jesus continues to allow them to eat with him.

What encouragement for us, asked to remember the Lord Jesus in broken bread and wine! Even sinners are welcome at the Lord's table.

### APPLY

When was the last time you took part in communion? You may or may not have bread and grape juice today to have physical communion, but take this time to reflect on Christ's loving sacrifice.

### PRAY

Lord Jesus, help me never to be afraid to come and share my life with You, as You share Yourself with me.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: DEUTERONOMY 15, 16 / ROMANS 3

## EGO A GO-GO...

### PRAY

I want to serve You God, but I am so weak. Be my strength today, Lord Jesus.

### READ

Mark 14:27-31

### REFLECT

**When was the last time you let Jesus down?**

Post-supper, Peter reminds us how very human we all are. We want to do our best, indeed we want to be better than anyone else, to the fault that we do not always see our own flaws – or at least want to own up to them!

Unfortunately for our egos, Jesus is very good at bursting the bubble precisely: “today – yes, tonight – before the cock crows twice you yourself will disown Me three times” (30). Peter is determined to stand firm with Jesus to the death, but does not see the flaw in his make-up; he is not strong enough to see it through.

Christian tradition holds that he *would* be strong enough one day, crucified upside-down, as he felt unworthy of being crucified as Jesus was. Peter’s words and behavior here reflect the frailty of the human condition – yet he did not give up but held on to his Savior.

When our faith is tested, it is then that we must dare to know our Lord better. And if we fail and fall, we must give of our best in prayer to the Lord to raise us up and stand us on our feet again. Jesus can cope with our failures if we will stand with Him to the end.

### APPLY

Do you struggle with guilt when you “fail” God? Humbly come before Him, admit your failure and then allow His love to lift you up to your feet to try again through His mighty power (Ephesians 6:10).

### PRAY

Lord, help me to remember: “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9).



Thursday, March 25, 2021

## LIVE AND LET DIE

### PRAY

"My heart says of You, 'Seek His face!' Your face, LORD, I will seek" (Psalm 27:8).

### READ

Mark 14:32-42

### REFLECT

**What is your deepest desire?**

As Jesus says, everything is possible for God, so why was it that Jesus had to die? Was there not another way that salvation could come to all? Did the disciples ask themselves that same question on Good Friday afternoon?

Jesus teaches us a very important thing about God – it is all about Him. Whether it is the Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit, or all three together, it is all about God. He knows all, He directs all, and, most importantly, He sees the bigger picture.

Asking for relief from the task shows a very human side of Jesus that most of us would share (35), and yet His divine nature takes the lead: "Yet not what I will, but what You will" (36). Why didn't the Father listen to the Son? The Father knew that the only way to take away sin in order to save someone was to remove the penalty of sin – "once for all" (Hebrews 10:10). Jesus knew it too.

Do we understand it, though? If our impression of God is of the cuddly creator and comforter, we can be asleep to the fact that sometimes He takes hard decisions to get the best for those He loves most. That was why Jesus had to die.

### APPLY

Do you really want to follow God's will, or your version of it? Is there a decision you are struggling to make? Is the Lord asking for surrender in a certain area of your life? Make Jesus' prayer your own.

### PRAY

Help me, Lord, to say "Your will be done."

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: DEUTERONOMY 19, 20 / ROMANS 4

## IT'S IN HIS KISS

**PRAY** Jesus, strengthen me for this day. Only You know what is coming my way; prepare my spirit to reflect who You are.

**READ** Mark 14:43-52

**REFLECT** **“Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses” (Proverbs 27:6). Have you ever felt betrayed?**

The moment of decision: the mob turns up to arrest Jesus. Before the betrayal Judas not only arranged to identify the “guilty” man, but also gave orders as to what to do with Him: “arrest Him and lead Him away under guard” (43,44).

These are very specific orders. How much was Judas in collusion with the leaders? Had they given him authority to order the guards? Did this show that Judas thought Jesus would fight back? Perhaps Judas suspected something (Matthew 26:53). Judas had known Jesus almost as long as the other disciples. Maybe he thought that Jesus was only human after all, thus the betrayal in the kindly manner of greeting. No need for shouting, Jesus’ bewilderment would be sufficient for the guards to do their business – but it would be the kiss of death to both.

And what of the other disciples? What of us, looking on the scene now? What would we have done at Jesus’ arrest? What do we do now? There are two choices: to “exit stage left” or to follow to see what happens. What are we to do?

**APPLY** Some disciples fled, Peter tried to fight. Neither was the correct response at that time. What’s your go-to response, fight or flight? Ask God to help you seek His response before you act in tricky situations.

**PRAY** Jesus, I don’t want to just react to the world and the situations that come against me, I want to choose to act in a godly way. Help me.

Saturday, March 27, 2021

## WHO ARE YOU?

### PRAY

Jesus, I love You. Take all my doubts and fears and questions. Show me who You really are.

### READ

Mark 14:53–65

### REFLECT

**Where do your ideas of Jesus come from? The Bible? Church? Popular culture? Tradition?**

“Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” (61). Was Jesus really the Son of God or a fraud?

The high priest speaks as though he is expecting a Son of God and a Messiah – after all, hadn’t Isaiah said as much (Isaiah 9:7)? But was Jesus the one? So, he asks Him straight out. Note that Jesus had remained silent at the false accusations of His accusers (61), but He answers this question (62). The high priest’s reaction of tearing his clothes tells us that this was the moment he was waiting for – blasphemous condemnation from the man’s own lips (63, 64)! His public display of displeasure is mirrored in Matthew 27:51 when the Temple curtain is torn in two (See Craig S Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 1993).

In response to the high priest’s question, Jesus replies, “I am” (62). But Jesus knew He was also standing in the presence of His heavenly Father. The Father knew who Jesus was. The question is, do we?

### APPLY

Does Jesus ever “disappoint” you? What He does or says doesn’t fit with your image of who you think Jesus should be? Open your hands and surrender to Jesus today, trusting that He knows best.

### PRAY

Jesus, I want to follow You for who You are, not for who the culture says You are or who I think I want You to be.



## HELP!

### PRAY

My Jesus, I need You, be my strength today as I meet You in Your Word.

### READ

Psalm 118

### REFLECT

**What has the Lord helped you through?**

This Sunday reading gives us the chance to pause and think about Jesus' situation from His own point of view. Imagine reading this psalm from Jesus' perspective.

His human nature surely senses what is going to happen. Betrayed by His own short-sighted people, He is to be delivered into the hands of Pilate and certain death. His divine nature knows this is so. His sense of disappointment must be great. So, as we saw earlier in Mark 14:32-42, Jesus does what He has done all His life – He spends time alone with His heavenly Father and sets His face to what is to come.

In doing this, Jesus reflects a model for prayer described for all times and all occasions in today's psalm. Are we in a season of joy and blessings? Then thank the Lord for it and rejoice (1, 29). Are we in a time of trial? Then thank the Lord for that, because it is in trial that we learn most about our faith (13). And there are blessings to be had in trials if we look for them, the greatest being when we can look back and say: "I got through that because the Lord helped me" (13, 14).

### APPLY

Find a rock, hold it in your hand and remember what God has done for you and how He has been faithful. Keep the rock in a visible place as a remembrance.

### PRAY

I praise You, my God, that You are faithful. Remind me often of just how much I can trust You.

Monday, March 29, 2021

## CARELESS WHISPER

### PRAY

Spirit of God, be so real to me today. May I see You more clearly as I meet You in Your Word today.

### READ

Mark 14:66–72

### REFLECT

**Have you ever misunderstood Jesus?**

Peter's betrayal of Jesus is different from that of Judas. If Judas' betrayal appeared kindly (with a kiss), Peter's reaction is anger – he wants it known he has nothing to do with this Jesus: “I don't know or understand *what* you're talking about” (68). Fear of discovery and association are key here.

His third denial is different: “I don't know *this man* you're talking about” (71). Jesus had already told the disciples three times He was going to die (68,70), but the Gospels lead us to suspect that the disciples didn't really understand what Jesus was saying. So is it finally beginning to click with Peter? Is he crying out here, “I don't know *this* Jesus, give me back the Jesus I know and love – this isn't Him!?”

Does Peter's breakdown come in the realization that he has not followed Jesus to death as he promised (Mark 14:31), because maybe he doesn't recognize *this* Jesus, the one who is going to die? Perhaps Peter is realizing that he will never fully know Jesus until he himself dies and then discovers the full grace of God through the forgiveness and love of this Jesus.

### APPLY

Which Jesus do you cling to? Do you have preconceived ideas about what God will do? Pray that you will be able to let them go, confident that you can trust Him for the future.

### PRAY

Jesus, I give You permission to be fully You in my life. Root out any preconceived notions I have; let me see You for who You truly are.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: DEUTERONOMY 27, 28 / ROMANS 7

## YOUR LOVE IS KING

**PRAY** Holy Spirit, take all of me. Have Your way in my life.

**READ** Mark 15:1-15

**REFLECT** **Why do you believe Jesus is the One?**

Meanwhile, Jesus is led to Pilate who asks a question, knowing full well the answer (it's Herod!). But Jesus replies, "You have said so" (2). It's as though that title of sovereignty, even though unspoken, goes without question. Has Pilate answered his own question? Further enquiry elicits no reply from Jesus and brings mystery: why doesn't He defend Himself and what manner of man is this (4, 5)? Pilate's retort to the people: "What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" is the literary equivalent of washing his hands of the matter. After all, what do the riff-raff of this people know about it (12; Matthew 27:24)?

How do we see this King? Do we claim Him as King, accepting that what He says goes? We learn about Jesus from His own words, not from making up our own "Jesus" in our heads. The creature is not greater than its Creator; we must allow Him to reign in us if we are to rise with Him in glory.

**APPLY** Is Jesus truly King in your life? Does His Word have the ultimate say in your choices and actions? Kneel before Him today and surrender fully to God's will over your life.

**PRAY** Lord, You know all and are King of all, teach me Your ways.

Wednesday, March 31, 2021

## CLEAN UP

### PRAY

Spirit of God, help me to understand the truth of this passage today.

### READ

Mark 15:16–20

### REFLECT

**When were you swayed from the truth by the culture?**

Once Pilate has finished with Jesus, the soldiers have their turn. What is the big deal here for the soldiers? Crucifixions were common enough. Did they treat every criminal this way? Why are they so anti-Jesus, going to the trouble of decking Him out with the robe and the crown of thorns (17, 18)?

Did the soldiers represent a world like ours, where people often follow their leaders like sheep? Fake news enters our sphere on TV, the Internet and smartphones. The truth is often difficult to distinguish amongst the voices – and how we like to point fingers! How we love the anonymous security of being a sheep! But Jesus has sheep of a different kind, sheep who seek the truth while respecting the dignity of others. Jesus was a king, yes, but He was also a shepherd, and one prepared to lay down His life for His sheep (John 10:14–18).

To the soldiers, Jesus was yet one more criminal on a trumped-up charge. They didn't care – to them it was just a bit of fun (19).

### APPLY

How do we worship our Lord in our daily lives? What can we do to seek the truth and stand up against the “fake news” of non-believers? How can we share the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15)?

### PRAY

Transform us, Lord, through Your Holy Spirit.



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A FRESH PERSPECTIVE ON FAITH

# Take Your Devotions Further with *Discovery Extras!*

The **Discovery Extras** offer a weekly series of discussion questions based on a topic arising from the previous week's readings. The guide is especially useful for small groups or Sunday School classes

## Week One

1. If you were Solomon's psychologist hearing him recite his dissatisfaction with life from your couch while citing the words of Ecclesiastes 2:1-11, how would you as a Christian advise your patient?
2. Read 3:11 and note carefully the language that God has put eternity in our hearts. Discuss how this plays out when it comes to human accountability before God.
3. In light of national and world events, discuss the relevance of 3:16.
4. Note the language of 3:19-20. Discuss how this may have affected you personally during those years prior to meeting the Lord. Would you have been forced to stop and consider? Would you have sneered at it? Would you have tried to just bury it for now and deal with it later?



Send us an email at [info@scriptureunion.org](mailto:info@scriptureunion.org)

# Using God's Resources to fulfill God's Calling



## GIFT PLANNING ... FOR TODAY AND TOMORROW

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As stewards in God's kingdom, we want to harness as much as possible for the Lord's work and for our families. Making non-cash gifts allows us to do this through relevant and effective tax incentives.

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### Asset-Based Giving

Giving assets to extend the impact of God's kingdom is a Bible-based concept. Do you remember how Barnabas and the others sold land and fields they owned and brought the money and laid it at the Apostles feet (Acts 4:34-35)? As stewards in God's kingdom, there are numerous, tax-friendly giving tools available to us.

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### For More Information

To learn more about these giving opportunities, visit the Scripture Union website ([www.scriptureunion.org/plannedgiving](http://www.scriptureunion.org/plannedgiving)) or contact our office so we can connect you with a knowledgeable advisor at no cost to you (1-800-621-5267).



## In Dark of Night

Have you ever heard the expression, “*He’s afraid of his own shadow*”? Darkness can be scary, even when we have only ourselves to fear! I remember that as a little girl, I had a laundry bag that hung from my closet door.

It was shaped like rag doll, and during the day, I used it quite happily. But when the lights went out and I saw the shadowed figure moving from the breeze that came through my window, it was a whole different thing. I spent many open-eyed nights, half afraid that the bag that was harmless during the day would leap to life at night and find its way to me. I was sure the result would not be good.

Some time ago, Michael Card produced a wonderful album called *Sleep Sound in Jesus*. My children used to listen to it each night as they fell asleep. The lyrics in that album soothe the listener with reminders of God’s nature, love and care. I would have benefitted from having it myself during all of those awake nights in my room. One of the songs has these lines in the lyrics:

“Even the darkness is light to Him,  
And the night is as bright as the day  
So you are safe though the light grows dim -  
For even the darkness is light to Him.”

This comes from Psalm 139:12: “even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.”

As we enter in a new year and a new Bible guide quarter, we find another opportunity to look to the One who is Light to guide our paths and dispel the darkness. We have an opportunity to shine His light to the world around us with the hope and truth of Scripture. May His Word encourage and instruct you as you step into a new year and listen for His Voice, even and maybe especially, in the dark of night.

**By Gail A. Martin**

President

Scripture Union USA





# PRAYER JOURNAL

## DAILY PRAYER TOPICS

### SUNDAY...

Pray for your church, its pastor(s),  
leaders and congregation.

### MONDAY...

Pray for our country, the President,  
and all government leaders.

### TUESDAY...

Pray for any places of war,  
disaster or special need.

### WEDNESDAY...

Pray for your community and  
the issues that influence it.

### THURSDAY...

Pray for missionaries you know,  
for world and local missions.

### FRIDAY...

Pray for the ministry of  
Scripture Union.

### SATURDAY...

Pray for the universal Church,  
especially where facing persecution.

**"Do not be anxious about anything, but in  
everything, by prayer and petition, with  
thanksgiving, present your requests to God."**

(PHIL. 4:6)

## SPECIAL PRAYER REQUESTS

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_

6. \_\_\_\_\_

7. \_\_\_\_\_

## ANSWERS TO PRAYER

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7. \_\_\_\_\_

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