



**June 2023**

# **Prayer: Talking with God 2**

**Readings, Reflections, Prayers**

**Dr. Bruce Martin  
First Baptist Church  
1614 – 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue S  
Lethbridge, AB T1J 0W3  
403-327-2082  
bruce@firstb.net  
www.firstb.net**

**If you would prefer daily emails of these studies, visit [www.firstb.net](http://www.firstb.net) or email [info@firstb.net](mailto:info@firstb.net)**

**Monday, May 29: 2 Samuel 7:1-17**

How does God speak to us? What is God saying to us?

God's promises to David sound wonderful. In this reading, it sounds like David is promised a lifetime, dynasty, and eternity of wealth, success, and power. David and his line do indeed thrive. For a while. But David, his son Solomon, and his grandchildren, great grandchildren, etc. are rather stiff-necked, ornery, and often downright despicable. They stop following God. They do evil. Ultimately, Israel and Judah are conquered by Babylon and Assyria. David's royal line ends. Later kings, the Hasmoneans (established by Simon Maccabaeus) and the Herods (Idumaeans/Edomite descent), have no Davidic heritage at all.

**Jesus IS** the heir of David ([Isaiah 7:13-17](#), [9:1-7](#), [Matthew 1](#)). So as God promises, "Your house and your kingdom will continue before me for all time, and your throne will be secure forever" we can think of that in Messiah – Jesus – terms. In and through Jesus, David's Kingdom is established forever. Jesus, of course, comes announcing the Kingdom of God ([Mark 1:14-15](#)). He is the King. Through Him and His Spirit, God rules in the hearts of all people who love Him, honour Him, and seek to follow Him. This kingdom, the Kingdom of God, is inaugurated in and through Jesus. Jesus' Kingdom, the church, fulfills this promise.

Coming back to our text, I have rarely had God speak to me as clearly as He speaks to David through Nathan. Some people get a "word from the Lord" – a specific, definite special message from God – quite regularly. But I don't. When I pray I sometimes get a sense of God's nudge/leading in a particular direction, but I very rarely get a clear message from God: "Go, say this to Frank ..." And even more rarely does someone come to me and say, "The Lord told me to tell you this ..."

Is there something wrong with me? Should I expect this level of leading from God? Is there some sin in my life that is causing "static" so I can't hear God so clearly? What do I do?

Keep in mind this is unusual, even for David. It is a once-in-many-years-experience for David (the next time it happens is when David is confronted after a sordid affair with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband. When we have issues to deal with it's not always pleasant to get a "word from the Lord").

More often, David, this man after God's own heart, simply tries to do the right thing. That day-in day-out faithfulness is ultimately what pleases God most. Through our prayers, particularly as we pray through and about Scripture, God gives us wisdom to help make wise choices, good decisions, and live justly. It's rarely a spectacular "word from the Lord." More often it's commonsense wisdom, shaped by Scripture. Sometimes it's a nudge to do something good, speak some encouragement, or share some grace.

Ask God to guide you, moment by moment, day by day. Ask God for a Spirit-shaped mind that seeks to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God in all circumstances (Micah 6:8).

*Lord, teach me to seek You.  
Reveal Yourself to me when I seek You.  
I cannot seek You, unless You first teach me.  
I cannot find You, unless You first reveal Yourself to me.  
Let me seek You in longing, and long for You in seeking.  
Let me find You in love, and love You in finding.  
May I walk this moment and all moments with You.  
Amen.*

Ambrose (337-397)

**Tuesday, May 30: 2 Samuel 7:18-29**

Martyn Lloyd Jones once said, "Everything we do in the Christian life is easier than prayer." That sounds

wrong. After all, prayer is something we can do on our own, at any time, in any place. Prayer is simply talking with – speaking to and listening to – God. Surely it is much easier to pray than to talk with other people about my faith. It must be easier to pray than to be part of a church community with people who don't share my political opinions, musical preferences, or who question my theology (or my sanity).

David Wilkinson, Principal of St. John's College, Durham University, writes, "*I used to believe that prayer was easy, although it did strike me that if it was that easy, then why did I not pray more? The problem with pray, I concluded, was that I simply had not found the right form that suited me. And the history of my prayer life has therefore resembled a Google-like super-spiritual search of different ways of praying. I have tried praying kneeling, standing, sitting, walking, lying down, and crouched in that nonconformist way that everyone in a nonconformist church conforms to ...*" (quoted in *When I Pray What Does God Do?*).

He goes on to talk about praying by raising hands, folding hands, laying on hands, praying in tongues, using hymns for prayer, praying in prayer meetings, in large groups, in solitude, using prayer journals, and prayer cards. He talks about trying to pray in the morning, at lunch, at dinner, and at night.

After two pages detailing his experiments in prayer, Wilkinson (who has PhDs in both astrophysics and theology) concludes, "*I am left with the reality that Lloyd-Jones was right and I do find prayer the hardest thing in the Christian life. Why should that be? Perhaps it is to do not with **how I pray** but **why I pray** and, further, the way that I think about **how God answers prayers**.*"

As we read the text in 2 Samuel 7 today, the details of David's prayer are David-specific. But the **attitude** with which he prays is significant and relevant for all of us. What attitudes do you see in David's relationship with God and prayer that we can learn from?

A couple of things I note:

- David's humility
- David's sense of gratefulness and thanksgiving
- David's desire to simply praise and worship God

Prayer isn't easy. But I keep on praying. I want a deeper relationship with God. I will keep talking with Him, even when I don't get a nice, clear response. I will be thankful. I will praise Him. I will continue to pray His Kingdom come and His will is done. And I will bring the needs and issues of people I love to Him ...

*Breathe in me, O Holy Spirit,  
that my thoughts may all be holy.  
Act in me, O Holy Spirit,  
that my work, too, may be holy.  
Draw my heart, O Holy Spirit,  
that I love but what is holy.  
Strengthen me, O Holy Spirit,  
to defend all that is holy.  
Guide me, O Holy Spirit,  
that my walk might be holy.  
Guard me, then, O Holy Spirit,  
that I always may be holy.  
Amen.*

Augustine (354-430)

### **Wednesday, May 31: 2 Samuel 12:1-14**

On Monday, we noted it may not be pleasant to get a "word from the Lord." We don't know how long after the previous time this event occurs, but God has spoken clearly to Nathan again. It's not pretty.

You may want to read [2 Samuel 11](#) to get the full context for today's "word from the Lord" for David. To summarize: at the time when David, as king, should be off defending his borders, he is at home being a "peeping Tom" (or a "peeping David") watching his neighbour's wife take a bath. He thinks about it. He lusts after her. He seduces her. He arranges her husband's murder so he can have her. David definitely has moments when he is NOT "a person after God's own heart." In fact, in this case he has "*shown utter contempt for the word of the Lord by doing this.*" Ouch.

The "saints" of Scripture often have feet of clay. They are not perfect people. That's good to know.

There is lots we could talk about in this passage. Our decisions have ripple effects. When we make poor choices, other people are impacted. David's decision to shirk his royal responsibility leads to the opportunity for him to see Bathsheba. His choice to watch results in lust. His decision to act on his lust leads to adultery. His adultery leads murder. Those choices lead to the death of a child and David's public humiliation. (When we make good decisions, there are good ripples, too. Do something good. 😊)

Let's consider the role of prayer (or lack of prayer) in all of this ...

1. David, as king, should have been asking for God's wisdom and leading all along. What might have been different if he had done that?
2. When David first saw Bathsheba, he ought to have (a) turned away, and (b) prayed to resist temptation. This is what we all ought to do if we are tempted. ("*Don't let us yield to temptation*")
3. When David made his first move to find out who she was, he knew he was doing wrong. He needed to stop. He should pray for strength to resist ("*but rescue us from the evil one*").
4. As soon as David knows he has done wrong (which he must have known right away) what should he have done? The best course is to confess, repent, and change direction. And to do whatever you can to make the situation right. Does David do that? (Do we?)

When Nathan does speak God's truth into David's life, give David a little bit of credit: "*David confessed to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the Lord.'*" He should have done that the instant he began to **think** about Bathsheba. Then none of this might have happened. He should have done that the instant he asked about her. Then nothing more might have happened. He should have done that the instant he met her. Then nothing more might have happened. He should have done that immediately after sleeping with her. But the evil ripples spread. His lust and deceit caused at least two deaths and untold grief.

When you are tempted by anything you know is wrong, **immediately** (a) turn away and get out of there, (b) pray for help to resist the temptation, (c) ask for strength and be strong. Stop. Pray. Run.

The best path is always to do the right thing in the first place. **IF**, unfortunately, you do sin, the world has not ended. **Immediately** confess to God and other people if necessary. Repent. Change direction. God will forgive you. But you may still have a lot of work to do to make things right.

*Take, Lord, and receive all my freedom,  
my memory,  
my understanding,  
my entire will,  
all I have and call my own.  
You have given all to me.  
To you, Lord, I return it.  
Everything I am and have is yours;  
do with it what you will.  
Give me only your love and your grace for the journey.  
You are all I need.  
You are enough for me.  
Amen*

Ignatius (521-597)

## Thursday, June 1: Psalm 51

Some Psalms are anonymous poems/songs/prayers. Some, however, have clearly identified authors and clearly described contexts. Psalm 51 is one of these: "A *psalm of David, regarding the time Nathan the prophet came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.*" Very publicly, David is confessing his sin before God and the people. Very publicly, he is repenting.

Repentance has (at least) two shades of meaning (from dictionary.com):

1. to feel sorry, self-reproachful, or contrite for past conduct; regret or be conscience-stricken about a past action, attitude, etc.
2. to feel such sorrow for sin or fault as to be disposed to change one's life for the better.

Do you notice the difference?

1. In (1) you just feel sorry for and regret what you've done. That's it.
2. But in (2) you actually **change how you live** in response. You **do something** about it.

In the Bible, true repentance always includes **BOTH** a profound sense of sorrow for/regret over your sins, **AND** a commitment to live rightly in response.

For instance, as Jesus forgives a woman caught in adultery, He sends her on her way with the words, "Go and sin no more" (John 8:1-11). Change your life. I find it curious that, in this incident, Jewish **men** eagerly bring a **woman** caught in adultery before Jesus, gleefully hoping he will sentence **her** to death. Where is the **man** who is equally culpable? Surely, he was also caught in adultery? Or he could be easily identified? These **men** are a bit too eager to condemn only the woman. Especially as teachers of the Law/Pharisees steeped in biblical knowledge (including David and his adultery), this sexism is unforgivable.

Use Psalm 51 as an opportunity to reflect on your life and faith ...

What is God saying to you? What do you need to confess? What do you need to change?

*O Good Shepherd, seek me out,  
and bring me home to Your fold again.  
Deal favourably with me according to Your good pleasure.  
Please, forgive all my sins.  
Lord, You have given us your Word for a light to shine upon our path.  
Help me meditate on that Word and follow its teaching,  
so I do not go astray again.  
May I find in your Word the light that shines  
wisdom and truth on my path.  
I look forward to that perfect day when I dwell in Your house,  
and praise You forever and ever with them that are there.  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen*

Jerome (347-420)

## Friday, June 2: Psalm 3

Sometimes life goes well. Sometimes it goes sideways.

Unfortunately, David's life and his family are spinning out of control. While he is forgiven for his sordid, murderous affair with Bathsheba, scars remain. Neither he, his family, or the nation seem able to get back to the wide-eyed innocence, joy, trust, and purity that marked the early days of David's reign.

David's third son, by his wife Maacah (he had 8 wives), Absalom, was a great favorite of David's and the

people. He was charming, handsome, and a crowd favourite. Absalom loved the pomp and ceremony of royalty. He also lived in style. He drove a magnificent chariot and had fifty men run before him. After his full sister, Tamar, was raped by his half-brother, Amnon, David's eldest son (if Dad/David can mess around, why couldn't Amnon?), Absalom plots revenge for two years. He invites all the king's sons to a feast. Absalom has his servants murder Amnon after he gets drunk (if Dad/David can have a man killed, why can't Absalom?). The boys are following in David's sinful footsteps. David has confessed and been forgiven, but the ripple effects from his sins continue to spread like cancer (if you are tempted to do something wrong – DON'T. PRAY. Be strong. Life will be SO much better, for everyone, if you resist).

Absalom ends up leading a *coup d'état* to depose David and install himself as king. David flees for his life beyond the Jordan River. Many innocent people die.

Psalm 3 is David's prayer, "*regarding the time David fled from his son Absalom.*"

David began his adult life hiding in the wilderness fleeing from King Saul's wrath. Now he is back in the wilderness, fleeing from his son's murderous rampage. David is older and – maybe – a bit wiser now?

As you read Psalm 3, what strikes you about David's prayer?

If you were going through difficult times (maybe you are), how might Psalm 3 be helpful?

Pray Psalm 3. Or paraphrase its words and make it your own. Bring your life – it's good and it's bad – before God ...

*Lord, your Word promises you "give rest to the weary and joy to the sorrowing."  
Your Truth nourishes the root of our hearts, helping us bloom in the desert.  
Your love revitalizes us when circumstances threaten to dehydrate our faith.  
When we are surrounded by the dryness of uncertainties, fears, or change,  
saturate us with Your presence,  
pour Your peace into every fiber of our being  
until we radiate with resilience.  
No matter where you have us planted,  
help us bloom for Your glory.  
We love you. We need you. We praise you.  
In Jesus's name,  
Amen*

### **Saturday, June 3: 2 Samuel 22**

Toward the end of his life, "*David sang this song to the Lord on the day the Lord rescued him from all his enemies and from Saul.*" This is a psalm. Instead of being in the "Book of Psalms" in our Bibles, it is embedded in the general narrative of David's life (recorded in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel). In fact, this song is recorded as David's second last speech before he dies (his final words are in [2 Samuel 23:1-7](#)).

David has been through a lot.

- Absalom's revolt is eventually ended by the young man's death. Paradoxically, this causes David great sorrow and grief.
- Another "troublemaker," Sheba, leads another violent uprising. Innocent people die.
- There is a three-year famine.
- There is war after war with the Philistines.

For David, it has not been an easy life (so if you might have thought [2 Samuel 7:1-16](#) promised only health, wealth, and prosperity, you'd be wrong).

We can read 2 Samuel 22 as David's spiritual autobiography.

- What is inspiring in this psalm?
- What challenges you?

If you were to write your spiritual autobiography, what might it include? Why not try it ...

*Alone with none but You, my God,  
I journey on my way.  
What need I fear, when you are near,  
O King of night and day?  
Safer am I within Your hand,  
as you guide me day by day,  
than if a host did round me stand;  
Your Spirit leads me all the way.  
Amen*

Columba (521-597)

### **Sunday, June 4: 1 Kings 3**

If God were to say to you, "*What do you want? Ask, and I will give it to you,*" what would you ask for?

Solomon is David's son. Like his father, Solomon starts off really well. Then his life, like David's, spirals into temptation, disobedience, and sin. There may be lessons and warnings about spiritually healthy aging here for all of us. But that's for another time.

Let's focus on some of the highlights – prayer highlights – from Solomon's life. When God asks Solomon that question ("*What do you want?*"), Solomon asks for wisdom: "*an understanding heart so that I can govern your people well and know the difference between right and wrong.*" Is that a good request? Yes!

From the beginning, Solomon has an opportunity to see if God's gift is genuine.

How does the incident with the two prostitutes demonstrate wisdom? (in a bit of a dark way)

- Think about what you pray about. What DO you pray for?
- What COULD you pray for that you might never have thought of before?
- What qualities of character (wisdom? integrity? patience?) could you pray for?

James encourages us, "*If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you*" (James 1:5). Pray that God will help you live wisely and well today ...

*O Lord and Master of my life,  
Do not let me give in to a spirit of idleness,  
of discouragement,  
of lust for power,  
of greed,  
and of vain speaking.  
But bestow upon me, Your servant, the spirit of holiness,  
of meekness,  
of patience,  
of mercy,  
and of love.  
O Lord and King, grant that I may perceive my own transgressions,  
and judge not my brother.  
Blessed are You, O Lord, unto ages of ages.  
Amen.*

Ephraem the Syrian (306-373)

## Monday, June 5: 1 Kings 8:1-53

Canadian comedian, Stuart Francis, once said, *"My children are quick to blame other people – they get that from their mother."* I can blame others and excuse myself for all sorts of bad behaviour, too. When I blow it, my first inclination may be to deflect responsibility by blaming my circumstances, someone else, or my past. But maybe I need to take responsibility. Even though it's difficult, things go so much better when I admit it when I've made mistakes. And when I sincerely confess them, and genuinely apologize to God, and to those I've hurt, life goes so much better ...

David had brought the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem. But it is his son, Solomon, who builds the first Temple. As the ark, the holiest relic in Israel, is brought into the new Temple, it marks the beginning of a new era in Israel's story. Today we read Solomon's prayer for his people.

Notice what Solomon DOES pray about. He praises God for His love, faithfulness, mercy, and grace. At least half of the prayer is a prayer for the people of God to remain faithful to their Lord. He also prays proactively for forgiveness if/when they sin in the future (Solomon is a realist not an idealist):

- *"If your people Israel are defeated by their enemies because they have sinned against you, and if they turn to you and acknowledge your name and pray to you here in this Temple, then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your people ..."*
- *"If the skies are shut up and there is no rain because your people have sinned against you, and if they pray toward this Temple and acknowledge your name and turn from their sins because you have punished them, then hear from heaven and forgive the sins of your servants ..."*
- *"If there is a famine in the land or a plague or crop disease or attacks of locusts or caterpillars, or if your people's enemies are in the land besieging their towns – whatever disaster or disease there is – and if your people Israel pray about their troubles ... then hear from heaven, and forgive."*
- *"If they sin against you – and who has never sinned? – you might become angry with them and let their enemies conquer them and take them captive to their land far away or near. But in that land of exile, they might turn to you in repentance and pray, 'We have sinned, done evil, and acted wickedly.' If they turn to you with their whole heart and soul in the land of their enemies and pray ... then hear their prayers and their petition from heaven where you live, and ... Forgive your people who have sinned against you."*

He prays for foreigners. May they be welcomed among God's people (8:41-43).

His prayer is all about God and others – his nation and the refugees/immigrants among them.

What does Solomon NOT pray for? He does not list **his own** needs and wants. He does not pray for **his** personal glory. In fact, he does not pray for **himself** at all.

Solomon does not blame others. But he does acknowledge the reality that we all sin. We all fall short of the glory of God. But if we genuinely confess and repent our personal sins and shortcomings (in the dual sense of expressing regret AND determining to change our direction), then our entire society is a better place. What do we need to pray about?

Solomon models prayer for our community/nation/world as a whole. We can confess the corporate sins of our people as well. We can ask for God's mercy and forgiveness. What can we pray about for our city? Our province? Our nation? Our world?

*O Eternal God and King of all creation,  
forgive me the sins that I have committed today in thought, word and deed.  
Cleanse, O Lord, my soul from all defilement of flesh and spirit.  
Deliver me, O Lord, from temptation,  
and from evil desires which defile me.  
Help me make wise choices that honour you.*



*Help me pass the sleep of this night in peace.  
When I rise from my bed  
may I please You, all the days of my life.  
Lord, may I serve you with all my life and all my love.  
For Yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
now and ever, and to the ages of ages.  
Amen.*

Macarius the Great (300–391)

## **Tuesday, June 6: 1 Kings 8:54-66**

What do you want God to give you?

David Wilkinson tells of a conversation with a young woman: *We were talking about prayer and she was vehement in her belief that if you prayed for healing and financial blessing then God would give that. She pointed to the way that God had blessed her church and her own life in this way. It was a strong argument. When I tried to suggest, however, that God's blessing was not always in health and wealth, then her response was very simple, 'So do you think God wants us to be sick and poor?' Deeply embedded in this kind of message is the sense that God wants the best for us and it is just a matter of asking in the right way."*

Are the "promises" in Bible a contract that God must fulfill with each of us as well? Often God's promises in Scripture are to a particular person in a particular situation.

Are the promises in the Bible about blessing about material blessings, physical health and financial wealth in this life? (For example, John 10:10, *"The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life."* Or 2 Corinthians 8:9, *"You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich."*)

Interestingly, this health-and-wealth prosperity gospel developed in the U.S. in the post-World-War-II era, alongside the booming consumerism and rising personal incomes of the American suburban dream. Televangelists learned from advertisers you could "sell" religion if you promised a beautiful home, a beautiful family, and a comfortable life by buying their product (or giving to their ministry).

In this "gospel," God is an indulgent parent who will give His child everything they want, as long as they ask nicely (or if they have a temper tantrum). It's all about the child getting what they want (materially).

Is this the God of Scripture? The God we meet in the Bible is loving, but not indulgent. He provides what we need, but doesn't promise to give us all we want. We certainly cannot manipulate Him by our good (or bad) behaviour. God is God. He calls us to worship, prayer, justice, and right living for His glory, not ours.

What do you want this God to give you? This is what Solomon wants for himself and his people:

- *"May the Lord our God be with us as he was with our ancestors; may he never leave or abandon us."*
- *"May he give us the desire to do his will in everything."*
- *"May he give us the desire to obey all his commands, decrees, and regulations."*
- *"May the Lord our God give justice to his people."*

It's not about receiving health, wealth or material blessing. It is about God's presence with us (in our experience, through the Holy Spirit). It is all about us being faithful to God in the temptations, challenges, and opportunities of real life. And it is about living with a passion for justice and what is right in God's eyes: *"May you be completely faithful to the Lord our God. May you always obey his decrees and commands, just as you are doing today."*

In the words of Amos 5:23-24: *"Away with the noise of your songs. I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream."*

*O merciful Master,  
We bring you our prayers of worship and thanksgiving.  
O God, our Lord, and Maker of all creation,  
because of your love and mercy,  
you sent Your only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, for our salvation.  
With His Cross, He tore asunder the record of our sins,  
and conquered the rulers and powers of darkness.*

*Deliver us from every transgression and sin,  
and from all visible and invisible enemies who seek to injure us.  
Do not let our hearts be inclined to words or thoughts of evil.*

*Fill our souls with Your love.  
May we always contemplate You.  
May we always be enlightened by You.  
May we always know You and see You,  
Light of the world.  
Amen.*

Basil of Caesarea (330-379)

### **Wednesday, June 7: 1 Kings 18:1-40**

Life as a follower of God is not always easy. The health-and-wealth theology we talked about yesterday conveniently overlooks passages like 1 Kings 18:1-4 – famine, persecution, and hiding for your life with 49 other people in a dank cave (not quite the American dream).

Ahab, a descendant of David, and his wife, Jezebel, are synonymous in Scripture with evil. We read, "*Ahab son of Omri did what was evil in the Lord's sight, even more than any of the kings before him ... He did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than any of the other kings of Israel before him*" (1 Kings 16:30-33). That is saying something.

Give credit to Obadiah, Elijah, and the other faithful followers of God. Although Ahab can claim he is the rightful king, is heir to the house of David, and gives lip service to the God of Israel, these faithful people know Ahab's heart is elsewhere.

For Ahab it's all about himself and Jezebel getting absolute power, filthy rich, and feathering their own nest. Unlike Solomon, they have no genuine concern for their people. Despite Ahab's lip service of faith in God, he is selling his soul to gods of power, wealth, and personal ambition. He sets up altars to Baal. Baal, whom Ahab sets up as a deity alongside the God of Israel, is the god of Jezebel's home, Sidon. Baal's great powers are strength (power) and fertility (wealth).

While the majority of Israelites appear to be hoodwinked or seduced by Ahab's deception (who doesn't want more power and more stuff?), these few followers of God risk their lives to stand up for truth. It's not about material prosperity. It IS about doing what is holy, right, true, and just in God's eyes.

In a dramatic showdown between the "prosperity" prophets of Baal and God Almighty, what happens?

While we are commanded, "*You must not test the Lord your God*" (Deuteronomy 6:16), we do need to know that our God IS Almighty God, the Lord of All, the One and Only King of Kings, the Creator, the Only True God. Whether or not things go our way, whether or not we have health and wealth, whether or not we are "successful," our God is the Awesome God. He is with us always.

Historically, before standards of living and the prosperity gospel took off in the 1950's, health and wealth were not closely linked to God's blessing. In fact, true saints were those who renounced worldly possessions and lived simple, ascetic lives without material comforts. Often their healths suffered as a result. While some took this to absurd extremes, others saw sacrifice as the clear call of God. And a sign of godliness.

William Carey was a pioneer Baptist missionary to India. Carey, a shoemaker in England, taught himself Hebrew, Italian, Dutch, and French, often reading while working on his shoes.

In 1793, at age 32 he, his wife, and children sailed to India. He learned Bengali, Sanskrit and several other languages, translated the Bible into many dialects, published the first Bengali-English dictionary, and founded what the University of Serampore and an agricultural college. But his sacrifices were huge: he experienced the deaths of two wives and several children. He never returned to England. Never a healthy man, he died in Serampore, India. By health-and-wealth standards, Carey was failure. But Carey did more for the Kingdom of God than many of healthiest, wealthiest people ever have. At the end of the day, I suspect, Carey felt he lived an incredibly fulfilling, satisfying life before God.

What if there is more to life than just living the "American Dream" (is the Canadian Dream any different?)? What if it is not all about money? Power? "Success"? What if following God, even if it costs us something, is actually incredibly fulfilling? What if we can show the world that there really is a better way to live?

*O Lord, who has mercy upon all,  
take away from me my sins.  
In your mercy, please kindle in me the fire of Your Holy Spirit.  
Take away from me the heart of stone.  
Please give me a heart of flesh:  
a heart to love and adore You,  
a heart to delight in You,  
a heart to follow and enjoy You,  
a heart to serve you and worship you,  
a heart to live every moment of every day for you.  
In Christ's Name, I pray.  
Amen.*

Ambrose (337-397)

#### **Thursday, June 8: 1 Kings 19**

Spiritual highs. Spiritual lows. They happen to us all.

You would think that after his dramatic triumph over the prophets of Baal, Elijah would be riding high. But he's not. In fact, he has crashed into deep depression.

Part of the problem, of course, is Jezebel. She is not amused that Elijah has expose her selfishness, greed, and apostasy (she, like Ahab, may have given lip service to God, but she really worships the power and prosperity that Baal, the god of her hometown of Sidon, promises). Elijah is running for his life.

But Elijah has just seen God act in incredible ways, destroying the prophets of Baal.

Is Elijah's life a "success" story? Not by modern North American Christian standards. Yet he is God's faithful servant. Elijah models a different kind of success. Success is not about what I own or how much power I wield. Success is really about how closely I follow, listen to, and obey God. When Elijah is faithful to God, does God provide what he needs? Absolutely. That is enough. (Not necessarily what he wants, though)

Elijah feels has legitimate complaints against God in 19:10 (although he has his facts wrong). Spend some time reading 1 Kings 19:11-13 ...

We would love God to speak to us in the earthquake, wind, or fire – something we cannot miss. Something awesome, powerful, and God-like. But maybe God speaks to us in gentle whispers ...

How do we hear gentle whispers? What attitude do we need to have? What do we need to do? How can we do that in our relationship with God?

God gives Elijah help, but not in the way he might have expected. God gives Elijah what he needs most (though he didn't know it). God gives him a friend, Elisha.

Sometimes the most valuable gifts God gives us are not things at all, but people. The Celtic Christian tradition has a wonderful concept of a "soul friend." A soul friend is a close godly friend who encourages us and keeps us accountable in our spiritual growth. This may be a family member, friend, member of a small group or Bible Study. Do you have a friend (or two) who encourages you spiritually? If so, great. If not, why not talk with us about helping you find a small group ...?

*Lord, be with us this day.  
Be within us to purify us.  
Be above us to draw us up.  
Be beneath us to sustain us.  
Go before us to lead us.  
Be behind us to restrain us.  
Be around us to protect us.  
In all our ways may we acknowledge you  
and follow you in faith.  
Amen*

Patrick (389-461)

### **Friday, June 9: Isaiah 6**

The people of God continue to be ornery and stiff-necked. They fall away from faithfully following God, time and time again. God sends prophets to call them back to repentance. One of these prophets is Isaiah.

Isaiah "*saw the Lord.*" No one sees the Lord and lives. Because God is so holy, pure, righteous – and we're not – Isaiah is sure he's done for. Instead of zapping Isaiah, God cleanses him. God makes Isaiah as holy, pure, and righteous as He is. Isaiah does nothing. God, in His grace, takes away all Isaiah's unworthiness and uncleanness and gives him a new beginning. This is exactly what God, in Jesus, through His death and resurrection, does for each one of us. It may hurt a bit to change; but it's worth it.

This is also a missional passage. God is looking for people who will be His people, who will seek to live this purified life, who will encourage and challenge others to meet Jesus, who will be His ambassadors. Of course, every person – including Isaiah – are still going to be imperfect. We will still make mistakes. We will still sin. But we choose to aim for that life of holiness.

David Wells writes, "*Holiness is not a matter of people simply cleaning up their lives on the outside, becoming civil as a matter of politeness only, or going along with biblical teaching because others are doing so. This is not biblical holiness. This is, at best, social niceness.*

*"Biblical holiness begins with the Holy (as Isaiah discovered!). But the Holy, by its very nature, can be approached only when we come as sinners. He is never accessible to us as consumers. We come in sackcloth and ashes, not as buyers. Indeed, we cannot approach the Holy at all on our own terms. We must see that the Holy has first approached us in Christ and, through Him, reconciled us to himself. The revelation of the Holy would be unbearable were we to see it in any other way than from within Christ. In Christ, what we are seeing is God's holiness in its action on our sin. Without Christ we have to bear that judgment in ourselves. What we see instead is holiness coming down in grace and, in Christ, going forth against our sin in triumph.*

*"Holiness is so much more than just a moral code or a set of rules. It is all about what is right because it is all about what God is in his utterly pure being. It is his being in its burning purity that drives us in pursuit of what is right. And he has disclosed to us in Scripture, in a multitude of ways, what is right and true."*

When we begin to see God as Isaiah saw God and appreciate God's holiness. We have good news to take to

the world. Our God is an awesome God. He is Creator. He is King. He is Saviour. He forgives us. He is more than capable of handling all the world's problems – and ours, too.

And He invites us to be His ambassadors, sharing this good news with the world.

*Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I bless your name this day.  
Let all creation praise you.  
Let the daylight, and the shadows praise you.  
Let the fertile earth and the swelling sea praise you.  
Let the winds and the rain,  
the lightning and thunder, praise you.  
Let all that breathes, both male and female, praise you.  
There is no plant in the ground  
that does not tell of your beauty, O Jesus.  
There is no creature on the earth,  
there is no life in the sea,  
that does not proclaim your goodness.  
There is no bird on the wing,  
there is no star in the sky,  
there is nothing beneath the sun,  
that is not full of your blessing.  
Awaken my understanding of your presence all around me, Lord Jesus.  
And kindle my will, to be caring for your creation.  
Kindle within me, a love for you in all things.  
Amen*

Philip Newell

### **Saturday, June 10: Jeremiah 1:1-5**

Jeremiah was another of the prophets who spoke to the Jewish people. He warned the people that, if they didn't turn from their evil ways, they would be conquered. They would go into exile.

God also spoke with Jeremiah in amazing ways. Jeremiah has an honest, open relationship with God.

*Before Jeremiah knew God, God knew Jeremiah. Isn't that a profound statement. Before you knew anything, God knew you! Your life didn't start with you. Your salvation didn't start with you. You have come into a world in which the essential parts of your existence are already ancient history. Wow!*

Eugene Peterson writes, *"We think that God is an object about which we have questions. We're curious about God. We make inquiries about God. We read books about God. We get into late-night bull sessions about God. We drop in to church from time to time to see what is going on with God ... but that is not the reality of our lives with God. Long before we ever got around to asking questions about God, God has been questioning us. Long before we got interested in the subject of God, God subjected us to the most intensive and searching knowledge. Before it ever crossed our minds that God might be important, God singled us out as important. Before we were formed in the womb, God knew us. We are known before we know.*

*"This realization has a practical result: no longer do we run here and there, panicked and anxious, searching for the answers to life. Our lives are not puzzles to be figured out. Rather, we come to God, who knows us and reveals to us the truth of our lives. The fundamental mistake is to begin with ourselves and not God. God is the center from which all life develops ... My identity does not begin when I begin to understand myself. There is something previous to what I think about myself, and it is what God thinks of me."*

What does God think of you and me? *"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him should have everlasting life"* (John 3:16). You and I are God's beloved. That's

good news for us.

God's good news of great joy is for ALL people. Everyone you meet is God's beloved. We have good news to share. Use psalm 139 as our prayer today:

*O LORD, you have examined my heart  
and know everything about me.  
You know when I sit down or stand up.  
You know my thoughts even when I'm far away.  
You see me when I travel and when I rest at home.  
You know everything I do.  
You know what I am going to say even before I say it, LORD.  
You go before me and follow me.  
You place your hand of blessing on my head.  
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,  
too great for me to understand!*

*I can never escape from your Spirit!  
I can never get away from your presence!  
If I go up to heaven, you are there;  
if I go down to the grave, you are there.  
If I ride the wings of the morning,  
if I dwell by the farthest oceans,  
even there your hand will guide me,  
and your strength will support me.  
I could ask the darkness to hide me  
and the light around me to become night—  
but even in darkness I cannot hide from you.  
To you the night shines as bright as day.  
Darkness and light are the same to you.*

*You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body  
and knit me together in my mother's womb.  
Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex!  
Your workmanship is marvelous—how well I know it.  
You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion,  
as I was woven together in the dark of the womb.  
You saw me before I was born.  
Every day of my life was recorded in your book.  
Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed.*

*How precious are your thoughts about me, O God.  
They cannot be numbered!  
I can't even count them;  
they outnumber the grains of sand!  
And when I wake up,  
you are still with me! ...  
Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my anxious thoughts.  
Point out anything in me that offends you,  
and lead me along the path of everlasting life.  
Amen*

### **Sunday, June 11: Jeremiah 1:1-10**

God asks Jeremiah to do something he cannot do. Naturally, he refuses. I love the honest dialogue in this passage as Jeremiah tries to talk God out of choosing him.

When I am asked to do something that I know I cannot do, my first reaction is to refuse, too, so that I don't embarrass myself or anyone else. Following that logic to its reasonable conclusion, I might never do anything. If I look at myself and I'm absolutely honest, I'm always inadequate. I can always find excuses: I'm too young; I don't have enough education; I'm too tired; I don't have enough time; it's not my thing ...

Eugene Peterson writes, *"There is an enormous gap between what we think we can do and what God calls us to do. Our ideas of what we can do or want to do are trivial; God's ideas for us are grand. God's call to Jeremiah to be a prophet parallels his call to us to be a person (of God). The excuses we make are plausible; often they are statements of fact, but they are excuses all the same ... It is not our feelings that determine our level of participation in life, nor our experience that qualifies us for what we will do and be; it is what God decides about us. God does not send us into the dangerous and exacting life of faith because we are qualified; he chooses us in order to qualify us for what he wants us to be and do."*

God has chosen you, in order to qualify you for what He wants you to be and do. Just as He put words into Jeremiah's mouth, He will give you all the strength, wisdom, courage, knowledge, and skill you need to be and do what He has called you to do in His Kingdom. So ... no more excuses!

Pray, asking God to show you who He wants you to be and what He wants you to do in His Kingdom.

Don't be afraid: *"I go before you and follow you; I place my hand of blessing on your head"* (Psalm 139:5).

*Lord God, you have called your servants  
to ventures of which we cannot see the ending,  
by paths as yet untrodden,  
through perils unknown.  
Give us faith to go out with good courage,  
not knowing where we go,  
but only that your hand is leading us  
and your love supporting us,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.*

Eric Milner-White

## **Monday, June 12: Jeremiah 1:11-19**

Through our prayers, God shapes us. Changes. Teaches us. Encourages us. And challenges us.

Jeremiah is called to be a prophet. The task of a prophet is to call people to live well, to live rightly, to live in a healthy relationship with God. A prophet calls people to be truly human. But a prophet is called to do more than just tell people about God. He is also called to live what he preaches. We see this dual message – a message preached and the message practiced – throughout Jeremiah's life. This call to "practice what we preach" is for all of us. How are we doing at it?

To help Jeremiah teach and walk with Him, God gives him two initial visions:

1. The almond tree (1:11-12) is one of the first trees to blossom – white and snowy – in spring. The blooms of the almond tree are promises of fruit to come. God's words are like those blossoms – we may not see the fruit yet, but we know His words will come true. His promises are as dependable as almonds following the blossoms.

Though we may not yet see God's words coming true in our lives – yet – be patient. We can trust God. Whenever Jeremiah sees an almond blossom, he will be reminded of God's faithfulness to him. Whenever you see a beautiful flower, remember God's faithfulness to keep His Word.

2. The boiling pot (1:13-19) is a description of the political reality of Jeremiah's times. Enemy armies have invaded. Enemy armies are invading. This disaster is linked to God's judgment because His people have left Him and followed other gods (1:16). The boiling water is going to wash the land ("*I believe in getting into hot water,*" quipped G.K. Chesterton, "*it keeps you clean.*").

As we pray, God is challenging Jeremiah – and us – to be shaped by two visions:

1. **An unshakable faith in God.** We often *underestimate* the power of God. But the Spirit/Word of God blossoms in the most unlikely places and bleakest of circumstances, reminding us that we are never out His presence. Keep the faith. When we remember this truth (we "*get up and prepare for action*"[1:17]), we discover that God makes us strong, like a fortified city that cannot be captured.
1. **A realistic appraisal of evil in the world.** We often *overestimate* the power of evil. Evil is not out of control. God contains it. He has destroyed its ultimate power, once, forever, for always. Ultimately God can use even bad things for His purposes. When we remember this, we do not need to be afraid (1:17), for "*For I am with you, and I will take care of you*"(1:19).

*You are the great God – the one who is in heaven.  
It is you, You Shield of Truth,  
it is you, You Tower of Truth,  
it is you, You Tree of Truth,  
it is you, You who sits in the highest,  
You are the creator of life,  
You made the regions above.  
The Creator who made the heavens also,  
the Maker of the stars and the Pleiades –  
the shooting stars declare it unto us.  
You are the Hunter who hunts for souls.  
You are the Leader who goes before us,  
You are the Great Mantle which covers us.  
You are he whose hands are wounded;  
You are he whose feet are wounded;  
You are he whose blood is a trickling stream – and why?  
You are he whose blood was spilled for us.  
We answer your call.  
Glory to your name always,  
Amen*

Xhosa, South Africa

## **Tuesday, June 13: Daniel 2:1-28**

Like Isaiah and Jeremiah, Daniel and his friends are God's faithful people. But they are in a culture that's at best, indifferent to God, and, at worst, downright hostile.

Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are Jewish exiles in Babylon after the collapse of Israel and Judah. The Jewish people failed to heed Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the other prophets. They are conquered.

In a moment of national (and personal) crisis, what does Daniel do? He prays.

Daniel has prayed previously for wisdom and insight. As we shall see, praying regularly is an essential part of Daniel's daily routine. He regularly prays three times each day. What does he pray for in this prayer?

First, he praises God. Have you noticed that almost ALL of the prayers in Scripture begin with praise for God? Do yours? How can we learn from this? Developing this discipline of praise seems to be a common theme. "*Praise the name of God forever and ever, for he has all wisdom and power. He controls the course of world events; he removes kings and sets up other kings. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to*



*the scholars. He reveals deep and mysterious things and knows what lies hidden in darkness, though he is surrounded by light."*

Second, Daniel is thankful. Have you noticed how common the theme of thanksgiving is in Scriptural prayers, too? How can we do this better? *"I thank and praise you, God of my ancestors, for you have given me wisdom and strength. You have told me what we asked of you and revealed to us what the king demanded."*

What can you praise God for? What are you thankful for?

Jeremiah will write a letter to Daniel and the Jews in exile in Babylon. He will say, *"Build homes, and plan to stay. Plant gardens, and eat the food they produce. Marry and have children. Then find spouses for them so that you may have many grandchildren. Multiply. Do not dwindle away. And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare"*(Jeremiah 29:5-7).

*"Work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile,"* God says to Daniel and his people. *"Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare"*(Jeremiah 29:5-7).

- How can you work for the peace and prosperity of our city?
- Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare ...

*As I rise from sleep I thank You, O Holy Trinity,  
Father, Son, and Spirit.  
Through Your great goodness and patience  
You have had mercy on me, a sinner.  
You have shown great mercy and love to me and all people.  
When I am in despair, you raise me into a new morning,  
through your grace and power.  
Enlighten my mind's eye to study Your words,  
understand Your commandments,  
and do Your will.  
May my soul sing to You in heartfelt adoration and praise.  
All glory to You, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
now and ever, and to the ages of ages.  
Amen.*

Basil the Great (329-379)

### **Wednesday, June 14: Daniel 3**

I came to faith in Jesus way back the late 1970's. At that time one of the most influential Christian musicians was Keith Green (tragically killed in a plane crash in 1982). Among the first Christian LPs I bought was his album, *No Compromise* (back then vinyl records were the only option). On the cover was a picture of one of the Jewish exiles refusing to bow to Nebuchadnezzar. There was actually no song called "No Compromise" on the album. It was the theme of the entire album.

The song that best captured Keith Green's passion, "Make My Life a Prayer to You," includes those words. I listened to it so much that, as I write these words 40+ years later, I can hear it clearly in my head. It made a lasting impression on me. (Video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QLLs7\\_XbO3U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QLLs7_XbO3U)):

*Make my life a prayer to You. I want to do what you want me to.  
No empty words and no white lies, No token prayers, no compromise.  
  
I want to shine the light You gave / Through Your Son You sent to save us  
From ourselves and our despair / It comforts me to know You're really there.*

*Well I want to thank you now / For being patient with me.  
Oh it's so hard to see / When my eyes are on me.  
I guess I'll have to trust / And just believe what You say:  
Oh you're coming again, / Coming to take me away.*

*I want to die and let You give / Your life to me so I might live  
And share the hope You gave to me, / The love that set me free.*

*I want to tell the world out there, / You're not some fable or fairy tale  
That I've made up inside my head: / You're God, the Son, You've risen from the dead.*

*Oh I want to thank you now / For being patient with me  
Oh it's so hard to see / When my eyes are on me  
I guess I'll have to trust / And just believe what You say  
Oh you're coming again / Coming to take me away*

*I want to die and let You give / Your life to me so I might live  
And share the hope You gave to me / I want to share the love that set me free.*

Pray that we might live lives of "no compromise" before the Lord ...

Lord, make my life a prayer to you ...

*You, Lord, created the earth.  
You are faithful throughout all generations,  
righteous in your judgments,  
marvelous in strength and majesty,  
good in all that is observed and faithful to those who trust in you,  
merciful and compassionate.*

*Forgive us our sins and our injustices,  
our transgressions and our shortcomings.  
Cleanse us with the cleansing of your truth.  
Help us do what is good and pleasing in your sight.  
No compromise.  
Yes, Lord, let your face shine upon us in peace, for our good.  
May we be delivered from every sin by your arm.  
Keep us faithful.*

*Give harmony and peace to us and to all who dwell on the earth,  
just as you have always done for your people  
when they call upon you in faith and trust.  
May we heed your commands.  
May we serve you in Word and in deed,  
for faith without good deeds is useless.  
And unless we tell the good news, how shall they hear?  
Amen*

Clement of Rome (died 99 AD)

### **Thursday, June 15: Daniel 6**

Daniel and his friends demonstrate a dogged determination to be faithful to God despite the opposition of the powers around them. Note: they do not demonstrate in the streets. They do not circulate petitions. They do not post angry Facebook posts. They do not make signs and picket the palace. They do not disrupt public meetings. They do not say nasty things about the king/government.

What do they do? They keep on doing what they know is right, good, and true. They keep living faithful, godly lives. In Daniel's case that means praying three times a day in his home as he always does.

How does God honour their faithfulness (in yesterday's and today's readings)?

What is the result of their faithful living (look back at [Daniel 3:28-30](#) and Daniel 6:25-28)?

What might we learn from the example of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego about what it means to *"Work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare"* (Jeremiah 29:7).

God calls us to faithfulness. He calls us to model a better way – a Jesus-centred way – of living. He does not call us to post nasty posts or retweet nasty tweets. He does not call us to mock, ridicule or call down our political leaders (He does call us to PRAY for them.). He does not call us to protest. God calls us to model a new way of living, a grace-full way of living, a Kingdom life that is centered on Jesus and His example.

Considering our readings this week, reflect on Jesus' words: *"No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?*

*"And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own"* (Matthew 6:24-34).

What is Jesus saying to you?

*I do not shape you, O God;  
it is, You, my God, who shapes me.  
I am the work of your hands  
and I will allow your Spirit  
to re-make me in His image.  
I offer you my heart, my life, my all,  
Hard, broken and twisted though I may be.  
I pray you sculpt me into the person you created me to be,  
beautiful, faithful, and free.  
May the imprint of your fingers on my life never fade,  
but always bring honour and glory to your Name.  
Amen*

based on Irenaeus (died 202 AD)

### **Friday, June 16: Daniel 9:1-20**

Jeremiah wrote a letter to the Jewish exiles in Babylon: *"Build homes, and plan to stay ... work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare"*).

Jeremiah's letter continues: *"This is what the Lord says: 'You will be in Babylon for seventy years. But then*

*I will come and do for you all the good things I have promised, and I will bring you home again. For I know the plans I have for you,' says the Lord. 'They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. In those days when you pray, I will listen. If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me. I will be found by you,' says the Lord. 'I will end your captivity and restore your fortunes. I will gather you out of the nations where I sent you and will bring you home again to your own land'"(Jeremiah 29:10-14).*

(Aside: we often pull Jeremiah 29:11 ("I know the plans I have for you ...") out of context. It is just one sentence in a longer letter to a specific people in specific place at a specific time in their history. We have to be careful yanking it out of context and "claiming" it as God's promise to **us, here** in Lethbridge Canada (or wherever you are), **today**, June 16, 2023. This is part of Jeremiah's letter to people IN EXILE)

This letter seems to be the inspiration for Daniel's prayer in Daniel 9 (see 9:2). How does Daniel pray for his people? What is the theme of his prayer?

Daniel is preoccupied with God's character. He knows who God is. In light of this, Daniel is also very aware of how far short his people have fallen. They have done wrong. They have sinned. Interestingly, Daniel does NOT pray, *Have mercy on THEM, O Lord ...*" He DOES pray, *"Have mercy on US, O Lord ..."* Daniel recognizes that he, too, needs the grace, mercy, and love of God.

We can easily look at **other people** and see how **they** fall far short of the glory of God. We can see **their** shortcomings with no difficulty. But Daniel challenges **me** to be humble enough to recognize that **I** also fall short. **We all** fail. **We all** sin. And **we all** need God's forgiveness.

At a very practical level, in our (Baptist) church architecture, the communion table is intentionally on the main floor of the church, not up on the platform. As we celebrate the Lord's Supper and remember Jesus' sacrifice for our sins, we **ALL** come to the table as equals. None of us is perfect. None of us is more holy than another. It's a level playing field. We **ALL** come as those confessing our sin – seniors, youth, men, women, pastors, custodians, doctors, teachers, labourers, retired people.

*"This prayer," writes John White, "is recorded to teach you. It is intended to alert you to the lack of God-centeredness in your prayers. It may never have occurred to you that God's honour and reputation are subjects you should be praying about. The truth is that they should form the very basis of your praying."* How can you pray about God's honour and reputation?

This prayer also teaches us to pray for our community, including ourselves. We all live each moment of every day in God's presence. We need to be always examining ourselves, confessing our sins, mistakes, and shortcomings. And we need to pray for one another. Then may God indeed give us a future and a hope.

Work for the peace and prosperity of our city. Pray to the Lord for it.

*If there is righteousness in the heart,  
there will be beauty in the character.  
If there is beauty in the character,  
there will be harmony in the home.  
If there is harmony in the home,  
there will be order in the nation.  
If there is order in the nation,  
there will be peace in the world.  
Lord, so let it be. So let it be.  
Amen.*

Scottish Prayer

## **Saturday, June 17: Nehemiah 1**

When life is tough ... I just want a miracle. I'll just pray for a miracle. God will do it. Right?

Nehemiah, like Daniel and his buddies, is a Jew who has risen to a position of great responsibility in the Babylonian world. As cupbearer to the king, he is responsible to make sure the royal wine isn't poisoned. As he hears about the desolation in Jerusalem, he wants to ask the king if he can return to his ancestral homeland and rebuild the city. Asking such a favour of the king is a terrifying prospect ([Nehemiah 2](#)).

Before he approaches the king, Nehemiah prays. For four months. One of his prayers is recorded for us in Nehemiah 1:5-11. Nehemiah might have prayed, "Lord, I need a miracle. Please miraculously rebuild Jerusalem." He might have prayed, "Lord, there's this need. Send someone (else) to fix it ..." But that's not what he prays. Like Daniel, Nehemiah spends much more time praying about the faithfulness and glory of God. He spends time confessing his (and his people's) sins. I'm sure many, many Jewish people prayed for miraculous political deliverance, but to this point God has not chosen to do that. Nehemiah's prayer is a prayer for deeper spiritual transformation. And he is willing to put his own shoulder to the wheel.

David Wilkinson notes, "*Nehemiah did not need to engage in this kind of prayer. After all, life for him was pretty good. He was a trusted official on holiday with the king's court in Susa, the winter palace of the Persian kings. Nehemiah is not presented as a priest, or a prophet, or even someone who experiences a dramatic call from God to go back and rebuild Jerusalem. If I am honest I find this immensely challenging. Too often my prayer life centres on what is important to me – my family, friends, and work. It is about making life more comfortable, and a winter palace retreat with the royal family sounds rather attractive. But **concern for people in need** energizes Nehemiah in prayer ...*

"*Second, **prayer is coupled with action**. For four months Nehemiah prays. Then a moment comes when the king asks him why he is sad and then asks, 'What is it you want?' (2:4). Here Nehemiah prays what contemporary Christian spirituality has called an 'arrow' prayer: 'I prayed to the God of heaven and answered the king' (2:4-5). Nehemiah not only asks to go to Jerusalem but also for letters of safe passage, and resources to rebuild the walls (2:5-9). There is no sense here of prayer asking God to do all the work while he stays in the safety of the royal palace ... When I pray, part of the answer of what God does is to change me and involve me more in his work.*

"*Too often prayer has been separated from action. For Nehemiah it was never an either/or. As he rebuilds the walls he is mocked, threatened, and opposed by a number of enemies. His response is, 'We prayed to our God **and** posted a guard day and night to meet this threat' (4:9) ... This integration of prayer and action is always important to understand. Christian life has opposite temptations. One is a Christian activism which believes we can do everything without prayer and without God .... But there is another temptation. This is to believe we simply hand everything over to God and leave him to do it all" (pp. 84-86).*

What can you pray about? How can your prayer be connected with action? How is God calling you to pray for – and to change – our family? Our church? Our community? How can **you** make a difference?

*Lord Jesus Christ,  
You have called us to be Your people in the world.  
Through Your Holy Spirit,  
You have given us all various gifts to minister in Your name.  
In the power of the same Spirit,  
help us so to respond to Your call.  
May we use Your gifts,  
to be good stewards in your world.  
Help us build up Your Church together.  
Help us bring others to know God in You.  
Work in us, Lord Jesus,  
that we might live for you this day and all days.  
Amen.*

Welsh Prayer

## **Sunday, June 18: Luke 3:1-22**

Today we'll move on to the New Testament. We'll look at prayer in the life of Jesus and in the early church.

By the time of Jesus, several hundred years have passed since the days of Daniel and Nehemiah. Many Jews did return and rebuilt Jerusalem (recorded in the books of Nehemiah and Ezra). But the Jewish people still struggled to remain faithful to God. The political nation of Israel was repeatedly conquered, freed, and reconquered. Biblical prophets continued to confront the people with their lack of genuine faith, injustice, lack of compassion, greed, idolatry, and downright evil (Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi).

At the time of Jesus' birth and ministry, Israel has been conquered yet again. It's part of the Roman Empire. Through the adult lives of John the Baptist and Jesus, the Caesar is Tiberius, the adopted son of Augustus.

John the Baptist bridges the gap between the prophets of the past and Jesus, God Himself, come among us. Like the prophets of old, John challenges the people of his day to recognize their sin, confess it, turn to God be forgiven, and genuinely repent. He pushes them not just to feel sorry for their sins, but to radically change how they live. One of the big themes in prayer throughout Scripture is the need to keep our lives focussed on God, to confess and repent, and then to actually live differently. Prayer changes us.

When Jesus comes, He chooses to be baptized by John. Jesus is not baptized because He has sinned. As God Himself, He is without sin. But He does identify with us. Jesus is fully God but also fully human. By being baptized, He chooses to identify with our humanity. He also models that baptism is an outward sign of the decision we make to follow God. Baptism is not a magical rite that confers some super-spiritual blessing. It is a public way of declaring our belief in/allegiance to/desire to follow God. Through baptism we express to others (and to God) that we have decided to follow Jesus. We want to change.

Jesus prays. Why would God Himself have to pray to God Himself? It's an interesting question. The Trinity – the reality that God is Three-in-One and One-in-Three (Father-Son-Spirit) – is a profound mystery which theologians struggle to define. Each of these Persons has an independent existence and yet is intimately interconnected with the others. They choose to communicate among themselves. It all boggles the mind. This is one reason why I find the Trinity so convincingly true: what human could have come up with a concept that defies all rational, logical attempts to describe it (with our limited brainpower)?

Jesus prays with His Father. Prayer, at its heart, is open, honest communication with God. This also sets an example for us. We are invited to be part of the conversation, too. We are invited to open, honest conversation with our Father, Jesus, and the Spirit.

What might you need to be honest with God about? To confess? To repent of? What is on your heart and mind? Bring it all to God and have a conversation ...

*I am a lowly creature, but I am still God's servant.  
I hope that he will set me on fire with the flame of his divine love,  
so that I am filled with desire for his love and his fire burns always within me.  
Lord, I beg you in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son and my God,  
give me a love that cannot stumble so my lamp will never go out.  
Let it burn in me and give light to others.  
Lighten our darkness and dispel the shadows of the earth.  
Light our lamps so that they shine forever in your world.  
Let me see you, watch you, desire you.  
Beloved Saviour, show yourself to us who beg a glimpse of you.  
Let us know you, let us love you, let us love only you, let us desire you alone,  
let us spend our days and nights meditating on you,  
let us always be thinking of you.  
Fill us with love of you,  
Then let us take that love into the world.  
May we live your love by loving others as you have loved us.  
To you be glory forever and forever. Amen.*

Columbanus (543-615)

## Monday, June 19: Mark 1:21-35

I try to read through the gospels every year. As I reread the life of Jesus, I've read each of these passages often enough, I can switch onto "autopilot," skim the words, and not absorb much. I already know who Jesus is, what He does, what He says. What is there to learn, really?

Let's try to really see what is happening here. Let's think about it in terms of prayer.

- Jesus is in Capernaum teaching in the synagogue. He is interrupted by a man with an evil spirit. With a simple command, Jesus heals the man (though the demon makes quite a scene).
- Later that day, Simon/Peter's mother-in-law is sick in bed with a high fever. Jesus goes to her bedside, takes her hand, helps her sit up, and the fever leaves her.
- People bring all sorts of sick and demon-possessed people, and, as everyone gathers to watch, Jesus heals many people and casts out many demons (many – but not all).

We read these passages assuming that Jesus heals in response to prayer. Sometimes He does. But the "miracles" (to use a non-biblical word) Jesus does are almost always very public and very intentional. For Jesus, these special healings/exorcisms are **signs** pointing to the reality of the Kingdom of God, the revolutionary new reality that comes into being as He steps into time and space. In the gospels, the writers almost exclusively use the word "**signs**" (not "miracles") to describe this.

The biblical words we lump together with the English word "miracles" are Hebrew or Greek words literally meaning "*signs*," "*wonders*," and "*mighty works*" – all of which remind us they are **acts of God**. They draw attention to **His** power and **His** glory. Signs direct us to **Jesus**, the Messiah, the King, God Himself among us. "Miracles" as we commonly describe them, are often about us. (One person recently told me, "**I** prayed and claimed **my** miracle ..." Or we say, "Baby Joey is **our** miracle ...") "Signs" – the biblical term – consistently point us to Jesus.

Yes, many people are healed and delivered by Jesus' actions, but the real focus is not the people but **Jesus'** power and "*authority*" (1:22) over the powers of evil and death.

We certainly can (and should) pray for ourselves, our friends, and family. But whether God heals us or not is not within our control. God may well heal. If so, that's a sign of **HIS** glory and power. We need to make sure we give **Him** the glory (sometimes I just take an answer to prayer for granted and never even say a "thank you" to God). God may well not heal us or our loved ones. That's OK, too. Jesus healed "many" but apparently not "all." After all, if the Spirit answered all our prayers for healing, no one would ever die in this life. We would live for eternity in these aging bodies, which would be a problem ...

Jesus does not necessarily respond to a particular form of prayer or approach. There is no magic formula. His healing is not contingent upon a certain "amount" of faith. He simply heals "many." Not all.

When God does do something significant in your life, celebrate it. It is a **sign of His** power and glory. Remember to thank **Him** for it. Tell people about **Him**. But if life goes on as normal, that's ok, too. Thank God for His faithful presence. Ultimately, we know that our real future is with Him, one day, some day.

In the meantime, our lives can always be "signs" of His power and reality. God's reality may or may not manifest itself in some physical healing. Instead, He may show Himself in "healing" our character. We may find God gives us hope and strength in adversity we would not have naturally.

We may discover God empowers us with an ability to forgive, a desire to serve, or a compassion we know is not "normal" for us. The Spirit desires to cultivate "fruit" in our lives – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are not normal in us. Other people notice there is something – Someone – different about us. These "signs" of the Spirit as much as any physical healing.

*God to enfold me. God to surround me.  
God in my speaking. God in my thinking.  
God in my sleeping. God in my waking.  
God in my watching. God in my hoping.  
God in my life. God in my lips.  
God in my hands. God in my heart.  
God in my working. God in my slumber.  
God in my soul. God in my eternity.  
Amen.*

Gaelic prayer

## **Tuesday, June 20: Mark 2:1-12**

The people brought **"all"** of the sick and demon-possessed to Jesus last time he was in Capernaum (1:32). Jesus had healed **"many"** (1:34) (yes, the Greek text clearly makes that distinction). Among the "all" we can assume had come last time was this man. Apparently, he was not among the "many" who were healed. Why? We have no clue. How do you think he felt?

Thankfully, he has good friends. Hearing Jesus is back in town, they are going to make sure their buddy gets Jesus' attention. However, the room is bursting at the seams. David Wilkinson comments, *"Houses that have been excavated in Capernaum show small rooms, seldom reaching as much as 5 metres, with the width limited by the length of tree trunks available for roofing. People were everywhere, packed into the house and packed around it. Now, as one commentator wryly observes, if they had been women they would probably have negotiated their way through the situation, but being angry men they could only think of violent action. The house would have been single storey with a flat roof, accessible by an outside staircase and used for working and sleeping, so it was not too flimsy. They men literally 'unroofed the roof,' a major demolition job, by 'digging it out.' One has great sympathy with the owner of the house. It is an interesting picture of 'faith.'"*

When the man is lowered into Jesus' presence, notice what Jesus says (not what we may think He says). Jesus does **not** say, *"Be healed,"* or words to that effect. He **does** say, *"Son, your sins are forgiven."* Seriously? That does not seem to be a paralyzed man's most pressing need. Besides, how much "sinning" can he get up to, anyway? After all their deconstruction efforts, how do you think his friends feel?

Remember, in biblical terms, this is a "sign." What is it a sign of? The teachers of the law understand right away: *"Only God can forgive sins. This is blasphemy."* Jesus is explicitly claiming to be God Himself, the Messiah. In yesterday's reading, people noticed, *"Jesus taught with real authority, quite unlike the teachers of religious law"*(1:22). The Kingdom of God has come in power (Mark 1:14).

Wilkinson, whose own wife has chronic health issues, reflects, *"In the frustration of personal need, and in the hope of release, we judge God's responses to our prayer in a very isolated way, not allowing the possibility of some bigger story at work. Sometimes that bigger story is not at all clear to us. Well-meaning Christians sometimes feel the need to try to explain fully the story with clichés or half-formed theology."*

Jesus does heal the man. But the bigger picture is about the reality of who Jesus is. He is explicitly saying that **He IS God**. Jesus says His forgiving of the man is a sign so they can see, *"the Son of Man, has the authority on earth to forgive sins."* Jesus is God Himself.

(The "Son of Man" is used to describe the Messiah in Daniel 7:13-14: *"I saw someone like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient One and was led into his presence. He was given authority, honor, and sovereignty over all the nations of the world, so that people of every race and nation and language would obey him. His rule is eternal – it will never end. His kingdom will never be destroyed."* When Jesus uses this term to describe Himself, He is explicitly claiming to fulfill this prophecy. He is God's Anointed Messiah. This is not lost on the teachers of the law either.)



Prayer, relating openly and honestly with God, is complex. Notice neither this man nor any of his friends even says one word to Jesus. They simply trust that Jesus sees their need. He will do what is best.

*"This is a reminder to me of the human complexity of prayer," concludes David Wilkinson. There have been many times that I have prayed with motives stemming from selfishness rather than compassion for others. Both my parents had difficult times in the hospital at the end of their lives. It was clear they would not recover, so I found myself struggling with what to pray for. There was part of me that wanted to pray for a quick and peaceful death so that they would be freed from the suffering. But I could not deny that part of that prayer was selfish. This was because of the weariness of constant visiting, the emotional toil of seeing them suffer, and all of the other areas of life that I had to maintain.*

*"If we do trust that God sees and responds to the bigger story, then we can bring all our requests with all their motives to him. I am relaxed enough not to worry about why I am asking, and confident enough that it is sufficient to bring all my concerns into his presence."* Bring all your concerns into His presence ...

*I arise today through a mighty strength:  
God's power to guide me.  
God's might to uphold me.  
God's eyes to watch over me.  
God's ear to hear me.  
God's word to give me speech.  
God's hand to guard me.  
God's way to lie before me.  
God's shield to shelter me,  
God's host to secure me.  
Amen*

Brigid of Kildare (451-525)

### **Wednesday, June 21: Luke 5:12-16**

Notice how this passage ends, *"Jesus often withdrew to the wilderness for prayer."* If Jesus were merely a human being, we might understand that. But we believe Jesus is fully GOD as well as fully human. Why would God need to pray to God?

People have all sorts of theories about why Jesus – who is God Himself – prays as much as He does. The two that resonate most with me are these:

1. **Jesus is setting us an example to follow.** Jesus could literally have been helping people 24/7/365¼ days of the year and not have healed everyone, helped everyone, taught everyone. The demands were overwhelming. He does model a balanced life. We can all keep hyper-busy; there is always more to do. Especially for those of us who work with people, there is always one more visit, one more phone call, one more email, or one more text.

Jesus reminds us a healthy life requires slowing down, getting away, and spending time with our loving Father. For those of us with a "Messiah complex" we need to remember even the only one, true Messiah took time off to pray.

2. **Jesus spends time with those "closest" to Him.** Jesus is One person in the mystery of the Trinity: God is One and yet He is Three-in-His-Oneness. He reveals Himself to us as Father, Son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit. They are inseparable and yet separate. It makes sense, then, that as Jesus takes on our humanity, and is separate from His Father and the Spirit, that He would cherish time with them and make time to spend with them. We make time for the people we love the most.

God desires a similar relationship with us. He invites us to spend time with Him – sharing our lives, listening to His Word, enjoying His presence, seeking His wisdom and guidance, bringing to Him those we love. Jesus models for us a yearning to spend time with the God who loves us.

C.S. Lewis, in a letter to a close friend, says, "The prayer preceding all prayers is this: 'May it be the real **I** who speaks. May it be the real **You** that I speak to.'" Lewis comments that often we live our lives as if on stage. We "act." We conceal the real "us" and share with God and other people a carefully groomed façade. However, what we really need to do is allow God to really know the **real us**.

Can I be the **real me** with other people? With God? What might that mean?

*I arise today, through the mighty strength, the power of the Trinity,  
Through belief in the three-ness,  
through confession of the one-ness  
of the Creator of creation.*

*I arise today through the strength of Christ's birth and His baptism,  
Through the strength of His crucifixion with His burial,  
Through the strength of His resurrection and His ascension.*

*I arise today through the strength of heaven:  
Light of sun, radiance of moon,  
splendor of fire, speed of lightning,  
swiftness of wind, depth of sea,  
stability of earth, firmness of rock.*

*I arise today through God's strength to pilot me:*

*God's might to uphold me,  
God's wisdom to guide me,  
God's eye to look before me,  
God's ear to hear me,  
God's word to speak for me,  
God's hand to guard me,  
God's way to lie before me,  
God's shield to protect me,  
God's host to save me from snares of devils,  
from temptations of vices,  
from everyone who shall wish me ill,  
afar and anear, alone and in multitude.*

*Christ to shield me today.  
Christ with me, Christ before me,  
Christ behind me, Christ in me,  
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,  
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down,  
Christ when I arise,  
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,  
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,  
Christ in every eye that sees me,  
Christ in every ear that hears me.*

*I arise today, through the mighty strength, the power of the Trinity,  
Through belief in the three-ness,  
through confession of the one-ness  
of the Creator of creation.*

*Amen*

attributed to St. Patrick (died 493?)

#### **Thursday, June 22: Matthew 5:1-12**

Over the next few days, we are going to read through what we call, "The Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5-7). Why? In part, because in the middle is Jesus' most direct teaching on prayer (Matthew 6:5-15). But

really all this teaching speaks to our relationship with God, how we relate well to Him, and how we live lives led by His Spirit.

If we think of prayer simply as the total of all our communication with God, this is all about "prayer." I find it helpful to take "prayer" out of the box of a set little devotional times, forms, or words. Prayer describes an ongoing relationship with God. I struggle to do the 15-30-60-minute devotional thing. I find lots of little "prayers" (as we thought about yesterday) work for me. The many-little-prayers-throughout-the-day (and the occasional more focussed prayer) thing much better.

Matthew 5 begins: *"One day as he saw the crowds gathering, Jesus went up on the mountainside and sat down. His disciples gathered around him, and he began to teach them. 'God blesses those who ...'"*

Stop there. Who do you think God blesses? How would you finish that sentence?

- *"God blesses those who pray the 'sinners' prayer"?* (Typically, something like, *"Dear Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner, and I ask for Your forgiveness. I believe You died for my sins and rose from the dead. I turn from my sins and invite You to come into my heart and life. I want to trust and follow You as my Lord and Savior. In Your Name. Amen."* It's a great place to start. But Jesus wants us to think BIGGER about our relationship with God.)
- *"God blesses those who have accepted Jesus as Saviour"?*
- *"God blesses those who go to church regularly"?*
- *"God blesses those who live 'good' lives? Believe the 'right' things"?*

Those are all good things. God does bless those things. But those are not what Jesus actually says. Listen to what Jesus does say:

*God blesses those **who are poor and realize their need for him (or are poor in spirit) ...***

*God blesses those **who mourn ...***

*God blesses those **who are humble ...***

*God blesses those **who hunger and thirst for justice ...***

*God blesses those **who are merciful ...***

*God blesses those **whose hearts are pure ...***

*God blesses those **who work for peace ...***

*God blesses those **who are persecuted for doing right ...***

*God blesses you **when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers ...***

- What (if anything) surprises you in that list?
- What (if anything) does NOT surprise you in that list?

The first one DOES deal with that BIG issue of knowing we need to believe in Jesus, confess, and repent. The others relate to working out what it means – to know Jesus – to follow Him as our Lord and Saviour.

For Jesus, putting our faith in Him and accepting Him as Saviour, God, and Lord go inseparably hand in hand with things like hungering and thirsting for justice, being merciful, working for peace, and maybe even facing real opposition because we follow Him. How do you feel about that? How does that challenge you?

As we think about prayer, a passage like Matthew 5:1-12 is a good one to "pray through." Spend some time really wrestling with what Jesus is saying here. How is the Spirit speaking to you? What might the Father be saying to you? How is Jesus inviting you to follow Him?

This is not "easy" stuff. What does it mean to be "poor in spirit" and know we really need to trust in God and God alone? What does it mean to be humble enough to seek His wisdom? What is God's justice? What does "peace" look like and how can we make a difference? What about that whole persecution bit? Spend some time really wrestling with God – talking with and listening to Him – as you read His word.

*Good Jesus, you have graciously allowed me  
to drink in the sweetness of your word.  
Lord God, open my heart and illuminate it  
with the grace of your Holy Spirit.  
Spirit, may I always seek to do what is pleasing to you.  
May your Spirit, O Christ, lead me in the right way,  
keeping me safe from all forces of evil and destruction.*

*Direct my thoughts and feelings so I may keep your commandments.  
Give me the strength of will  
to put those commandments into practice every day of my life.  
At the last, I pray, bring me into your presence,  
that I may listen to your voice which is the source of all wisdom,  
and be with You, forever.*

*Amen*

Bede (672-735)

### **Friday, June 23: Matthew 5:1-20**

You are God's beloved, chosen child. You are uniquely created by Him. You are so beloved that He sent His Son, Jesus, to live and die that you might have new life in Him. You are no longer a slave to sin, but you are free in Christ, blessed with the gift of God's Holy Spirit (Romans 8:11). You are secure in God's hands:

*"Nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow – not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below – indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).*

How then should we live? How do we live as disciples/followers of Jesus?

Jesus begins by re-orienting our thinking. Paul wrote, *"Those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit,"* (Romans 8:5). Jesus is giving us insight into what that means. When He says *"Blessed are ..."* He is using drawing on a Hebrew word which can also be translated *"joyful"* – in the deepest sense of inner joy rather than outward happiness.

The same word is used in the Proverbs 3:13: *"Blessed/joyful is the person who finds wisdom ..."* The Hebrew sense of being blessed or joyful is less about happiness than orientation and perspective. The blessed person finds what is meaningful and true in a superficial, shallow world. It is not an emotional feeling (like feeling happy). Biblical joy is a deep peace and inner calmness that comes from knowing that we are safe and secure in God's care and love, and we are walking in His way.

We live in a world that judges us by what we do: our job and accomplishments. Or we are judged by what we have: income, appearance, home, clothes, friends, cars, or vacations. Jesus is saying what matters most is not what we do or have. It's who we are and WHOSE we are: we are God's children.

We know people who have it all (in terms of success, status, and stuff) and yet are fundamentally miserable. On the other hand, we may know people who have very little (in terms of being well known, "successful," or having lots of possessions) and yet have a deep joy and profound sense of contentment through their relationship with Jesus. Who is better off? Who is the truly blessed?

People who have that deep sense of peace, contentment, and joy often know Jesus in a personal way. Prayer – in the sense of an ongoing relationship with Jesus – is important in their lives. They may or may not have formal "quiet times" or set prayer patterns, but they do spend time reading Scripture and talking with Jesus (if you know people like this, go for coffee, talk with them, ask them to share their story).

We live out our relationship with Jesus in the world, like salt (which was used to preserve meat and improve

taste) and like light (which shows us what things are really like, helps us find our way, and helps us just get things done). Salt and light, kept to themselves, are not much good. They need to be used ...

John Stott comments on the tendency of some Christians to retreat into a small Christian world where they are supposedly safe but have no meaningful contact with non-Christians: "*Christians have been blaming the meat (culture, society around us) for going rotten when the preserving salt has been taken out of it, and the house for getting dark when the light has been removed. It is time for Christians to recognize their responsibility to be salt and light in our society.*" We have opportunities to live out our faith every day.

- To live wisely in a bland, corrupt, rotting world takes wisdom: we need to know Jesus.
- To live wisely in a dark, dreary, lost world requires wisdom: we need to know Jesus.
- To live transformatively as the people of God, living His love, takes wisdom: we need to know Jesus.
  
- How can you be salt – preserving/standing up for/living out what is good? Adding some "spice" to your world by living in the Spirit?
- How can you be light – helping people see what is true? Helping people find their way to God? Helping people find justice, mercy, and peace?

*Living God, who turns dry land into pools of water,  
lead us to the spring of eternal life.  
May we drink and be satisfied,  
and become channels of Your grace.  
May those who still thirst find in You the water without price.  
Enable me to play my part in leading them to You,  
the never-failing fountain of life.  
Amen*

Welsh prayer

### **Saturday, June 24: Matthew 5:17-48**

"*The LORD,*" Samuel reminded us, "*doesn't see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart*" (1 Samuel 16:7). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is asking us to look into our hearts. Where is our heart "at" with God? Is Jesus saying what we do doesn't matter, then? Is He saying as long as we think our heart is in the right place, can we do anything at all?

No! Jesus challenges the rabbis' **interpretations** of Old Testament laws. He is not saying the Old Testament (including the Ten Commandments) does not apply anymore. Far from it. He is saying the **interpretations** of those principles the rabbis taught were not good enough. They focused entirely on outward behaviours not inner attitudes. If you didn't actually kill someone, you fulfilled the command "*Do not murder.*" If you didn't actually have sexual relations with another person's spouse, you honoured the command, "*Do not commit adultery.*" If you "looked good," all was well.

Jesus is concerned about the attitudes in our hearts, whether they lead to action or not. For instance, murder is usually the result of anger and broken relationships (most murderers know their victims). Anger is the real problem, even if we don't act on it. Infidelity is the result of choosing to entertain lustful feelings and a lack of commitment to one's spouse. Those underlying emotions (thoughts, fantasies, lust) are the problem, even if we don't act on them. Whether we actually DO wrong or not, if our hearts/minds are preoccupied with anger, lust, revenge – whatever – we are miserable. We are not living with the joy, peace, contentment, and purity of heart God wants for us.

So what do we do? Jesus seems to offer extreme advice. But He is not talking about literal surgery. The real culprits aren't our eyes or hands. They're just tools (our eyes are just how we get information and our hands how we act things out). The real problem is our heads and hearts. Jesus wants us to be aware of where temptations begin. The instant you are aware of inappropriate thoughts – do something. If pornography or fantasy romances are an issue for you, do something else. Pray. Distract yourself. Be

accountable. Get out with friends in the real world. Being alone, we can give in to temptation so much more than when we're with godly people. Pray again. It is much, much easier to deal with temptation before it starts than once a cycle of bad habits has begun. Remember David and Bathsheba?

We need transformed hearts and minds. Unfortunately, as hard as we try, we just cannot improve ourselves as fundamentally as we need to be changed. David, confronted by his own heart, mind, and soul issues, prayed: *"Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me"* (Psalm 51:10). What we need is for God to re-create us. That is exactly what He can do. Paul writes that if anyone welcomes Jesus as his Saviour, he is a new creation. the old has gone, the new has come ([2 Corinthians 5:17](#)).

The follow up challenge to believing in Jesus s SAVIOUR is to allow Jesus to be LORD of our lives. The Holy Spirit works within us to leads us and guide us. That is not to say that we will be perfect. It is to say the Holy Spirit continues to help us have more self-control and be more holy than we ever thought possible. But we have to take action. We have to try. When we stumble, we have to get up time and time again. Pray about what speaks to you from this passage ...

*I am bending my knee before my Father, who created me,  
before the Son, who died for me.  
before the Spirit, who cleanses me, in love and worship.  
Pour down upon me the rich blessing of Your forgiveness, O Lord.  
You who are holy and pure, please be patient with me.  
O Savior of glory, please give me a true knowledge of God,  
His love and His direction.  
May I do the will of God on earth at all times as angels and saints do in heaven.  
Each day and each night please give me Your peace.  
Please give me Your peace.  
Amen.*

Gaelic prayer

### **Sunday, June 25: Matthew 6:1-4**

To the Jews in Jesus' day, giving money to God was a religious duty. To give was "payment" to make atonement for past sins and gain favour in the sight of God. One rabbinical writing says: *"It is better to give an offering than to lay up gold. Giving will save you from death and purges away all sin."*

If a Jewish person wished to be right with God, he would make an offering. Making a BIG offering made sure you were safe. Theoretically giving was supposed to secret. But pure motives got twisted so that, in Jesus' day, some people gave with great fanfare. They made sure everyone knew how much they gave.

Giving is good. Every part of the Bible emphasizes that generous, gracious giving is a privilege and responsibility for God's people. It's a basic aspect of we are called to be. But it doesn't earn us favour with God. It is our voluntary, loving response to God's blessing and giving into our lives:

- **Giving is our act of thanksgiving and worship.** Giving celebrates God is the one who enables us to earn income: He created us with abilities. He sustains our health, provides employment, etc.
- When we give to the church **we give to God's work, building His Kingdom.** We make an investment in youth, children, those who cannot get out, sharing the good news, and caring for others. We invest in camps and new churches. Overseas we invest in needy children in Bolivia, youth in Cuba, educating pastors in India, digging wells in Rwanda, etc., etc. Giving leads people to Jesus, bring about justice and mercy, and changes lives in the name of Jesus.
- **Giving helps people in need.** It's easy to be patronizing and give out of sense of superiority or power. We need a humility that recognizes that *"There, but for the grace of God, go I."*
- **Giving helps us.** When we choose to give, we take control of our finances rather than being controlled by our pocketbooks. Giving helps us see and meet the needs of others around us.

Giving is good, but the motivation may be all wrong. There are a variety of reasons we may give:

- **We may give out of a sense of duty.** We may not want to give an offering at all, but we feel it's an unpleasant duty we just can't avoid. Grumpily, we give. As little as possible.
- **We may give to make God happy.** We feel like God will be like us more if we give.
- **We may give from motives of prestige.** There are some who, if no one was to know about it, if there was no publicity attached to it – or at least if it weren't a nice tax deduction – would not give at all. Unless we are thanked, praised, and honoured we are disgruntled and grumpy. We may give, not to the glory of God, but to the glory of ourselves. We deserve the praise. Not God.
- **OR, we can give because we know how gracious and loving God has been to us.** We want to give back to God. It's one way we express our love to Him and worship Him. We have a sense of the need in our church and in our world, and, out of our love for the work and ministry of our church, we give to God wanting to honour Him, thank Him, and build His Kingdom ...

Jesus calls us to a spirit of generosity that grows out of our relationship with God. It's not a legal thing: we don't give just 10% because we are legally obligated (the Old Testament starting point was a 10% tithe; the first 10%). It is not a patronizing thing (because we're doing OK, we'll condescend to help out others).

Giving is a relational thing. Because God loved us so much that He gave Himself completely to us in Jesus, because He is with us every moment of every day, we want to give generously back to God, His work, other people, and His creation. We give because we love God, His creation, and His people.

*"For you know the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ," Paul writes, "that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you, through His poverty, might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). Generosity is the instinctive outflow of the loving heart. It is worship (which is why we have offerings in services). It is us giving back to God as He has given to us. It is being a blessing to others as God has blessed us.*

Giving is not just about money, of course. We can give of our time, talents, abilities, education, skills, knowledge, experiences ...

I appreciate this insight from Frank Doyle: *"When you do good, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. That is almost a description of a parent changing diapers. Her routine is such that her right hand barely knows what her left hand is doing as she skilfully and rapidly folds and soothes. Nobody pays her, and nobody even notices, except perhaps baby if she is less than skilful.*

*"Even a mother's work seems easy compared with caring for the old and incontinent. A mother is handling the precious, promising body of her baby. She is rewarded at least with trust and occasional smiles. But when we are old, our body is falling apart, and our controls slip. We are not easy to help. We are proud, ashamed, and angry at how we are reduced. Smiles do not come easily. Yet across the country there are wives, husbands and other carers whose daily existence centres round cleaning up for their loved ones. 'Your father who sees in secret will reward you.' (Matthew 6:6)*

*"It is unfashionable doctrine. Thomas à Kempis, author of The Imitation of Christ, urged us to 'enjoy being unknown and regarded as nothing'. Lord, give me the ability to persist through tedium, to survive without the oxygen of recognition, praise, and stroking, and to do some good things every day which are seen only by God."* Pray about how you can give – something – to God in worship this week ...

*Help us Lord -  
To live in Your light.  
to act in Your might.  
To think in Your wisdom.  
to walk in Your kingdom.  
To abide in Your love.  
Your presence to prove. Amen.*

Welsh prayer

## Monday, June 26: Matthew 6:1, 6:5-15

Jesus continues to invite us into a genuine relationship. While some people use prayer to show off their spirituality, prayer is about spending time with God, focussing on Him, building a relationship with Him, communicating with Him, and speaking with/listening to Him. It's not about impressing people.

The "Lord's Prayer" (as we often call it) is not a formal set of words designed to be repeated over and over, preferably in King James English. It is a **model** for how we can pray better. Jesus is giving us an **outline** for how we can better understand God and His purposes in the world through our prayers.

*"It is interesting that it begins with 'OUR Father,'"* comments David Wilkinson. *"It links the person who is praying to other believers. Prayer is not just about 'me and my God.' We have often individualized prayer by our Western obsession that the individual is the centre of everything. Faith has become privatized ... I have been moved in praying with others to a new vision of God. There is something special in the prayer of other believers which lifts me into a new encounter with God ... There is a theological foundation for why this communal or corporate aspect of prayer is so important. It expresses that to be human in the image of God is to be in community, just as God in the persons of the Trinity exists in a community of love."*

Jesus' outline for how can pray well challenges us to keep things in perspective:

- We focus on God and His Kingdom first. Not ourselves.
- We pray for His will to be done. Not our own.
- We ask His Kingdom to come and His will to be done **right here, right now**. Probably that will involve us growing and changing. And helping make His purposes come about – doing something.
- We pray for our basic needs to be met. Not all our wants. We can thank Him for providing, too.
- We pray for forgiveness for our sins – but also freely forgive those who have sinned against us. We don't hold on to grudges.
- We pray for help to live holy, right lives by resisting temptation. We desire to live God's way.

So often our prayers become a shopping list of things **we** want. Jesus challenges us to pray bigger: to pray for God's Kingdom and will to come on earth as it is in heaven. And He challenges us to pray wiser:

- To pray for our basic needs and to resist the temptation to want it all.
- To pray for a perfect relationship with God, by dealing with the sin in our lives.
- To pray for a restored relationship with our family, friends, neighbours, and colleagues.
- To pray for wisdom, strength, and endurance to keep on keeping on in our walk with Jesus.

These are what really matter.

God is not impressed by the length of our prayers. He is delighted when, in our prayers, we re-align ourselves with His will, re-commit to our relationships, and re-aspire to be His faithful follower.

Prayer is as much us listening to God and being re-shaped by Him, as us telling God stuff. What is Jesus teaching you about prayer?

*Lord, we have fallen into sin,  
we have fallen into wickedness,  
we have fallen into evil.  
Lord, lift us up and set us free.*

*Lord, we have fallen into rebellion,  
we have fallen into disobedience,  
we have fallen into unrighteousness.  
Lord, lift us up and set us free.*

*Lord, we have fallen into despair,  
we have fallen into disillusionment,*



*we have fallen into depression.  
Lord, lift us up and set us free.*

*Lord, we have fallen into loneliness,  
we have fallen into darkness,  
we have fallen into hell.  
Lord, lift us up and set us free.*

*We come to You, Lord,  
for You alone can heal and restore us.  
We are not able to heal ourselves.  
we are not able to forgive ourselves.  
we are not able to restore ourselves.  
we are not able to sanctify ourselves.  
we are not able to satisfy ourselves.*

*We come to You, Lord,  
for You alone can make us whole.  
Amen.*

David Adam

## **Tuesday, June 27: Matthew 6:1, 6:16-24**

Parker Palmer writes, *"Authentic abundance does not lie in secured stockpiles of food or cash or influence or affection but in belonging to a community where we can give those goods to others who need them – and receive them from others when we are in need."* That's an interesting perspective, isn't it? Do you agree? How would **you** define "authentic abundance"?

Just after Jesus taught about giving and praying in secret, He goes on to talk about fasting – in secret. Fasting is when we consciously choose to forgo some earthly pleasure – food, entertainment, even sleep – to spend time focusing on God and praying with Him.

Bit by bit, Jesus is outlining a life which is in orbit around God. He is teaching us the key to a generous, cheerful, contented life is that we have a single priority in our lives. It's a focused life – a God-focused life. We know God's love. We try to do God's will. Jesus' point is not the specific disciplines of giving, prayer, or fasting. His point is we build a life that genuinely loves, knows, and is in relationship with our Father.

One of the great threats to building a genuine, meaningful relationship with God is "stuff." Jesus calls it "Mammon" – the god of materialism and money. Why does Jesus see it as such a dangerous rival to God? Money can easily rule our lives. It is easy to give (of our time and effort), to pray (in terms of focusing our hearts and minds), and fast (in terms of making personal sacrifices) to get more and more "stuff."

*"Show me your treasure and I'll show you where your heart is,"* Jesus says. Stop and think about that. If you're like me, your first thoughts at the mention of treasure are things like my bank account, savings, pension, home, car, and so on.

What is my "treasure" in a broader sense? What does matter most to me? Is it what people think of me? How financially secure I feel? Or is my treasure, the people that matter to me? Jesus?

What are the priorities in your life, as expressed by your time, your thoughts, and your sacrifices?

Taking time for Jesus refocuses us on *"Our Father in heaven ..."* Prayer reminds us to pray about His will being done and His Kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven (how can I live that out in my life?). Prayer encourages me to be thankful (how has God provided for me?). Prayer reminds me I need to confess my sin. Prayer helps me to forgive others. Prayer helps me reorient my life to God, His Kingdom, and the real me – the person created by God, created to live in His image in a broken world ...

*I ask, You, O God,  
to give me a more complete knowledge of Your will  
and to give me spiritual wisdom and understanding.  
May the way I live will always honor and please you, Lord,  
and may my life produce every kind of good fruit.  
All the while, may I grow as I learn to know You, my God, better and better.*

*I also pray that I will be strengthened with all Your glorious power  
so I will have all the endurance and patience I need.  
May I be filled with joy, always thanking You, my Father.*

*You have enabled me to share in the inheritance that belongs to Your people,  
who live in the light.  
For you have rescued me from the kingdom of darkness  
and transferred me into the Kingdom of Your dear Son,  
who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins.  
Thank you, my King, my Saviour, and Holy Spirit.  
Amen.*

### **Wednesday, June 28: Matthew 6:19-34**

Psychologist Wayne Dyer observes, *"You could take the ten best worriers in the entire world, put them in the same room for the rest of their lives and allow them to worry and worry only. And you know what would happen? Absolutely nothing."* Worry is something few of us value (I assume). But many of us worry far too often. Jesus wants us to get past our worry to live meaningful, content – peaceful – lives.

It's helpful to keep this passage in context. What does Jesus talk about immediately before this passage? *"Stop storing up treasures for yourself on earth, where moths and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal. Instead, store up treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moths and rust don't destroy and thieves don't break in and steal. Your heart will be where your treasure is .... No one can serve two masters. He will hate the first master and love the second, or he will be devoted to the first and despise the second. You cannot serve God and wealth."*

Now in Matthew 6:25, Jesus says, *"THEREFORE I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink ..."*

What is the antidote for worry? Trust God. Let God be in control. When we do really know and have faith in *"Our Father in heaven"* we can trust Him for our needs. We can be secure in His grace.

Jesus is NOT saying we should abandon all common sense and not take responsibility for our basic welfare. He is not saying we just stay home, pray, and expect our mortgage to miraculously pay itself.

He is saying that to **worry** – to spend time and energy simply fretting about things – doesn't get us anywhere. He is saying that we can have confidence that, if we really are seeking first the Kingdom of God, we can trust Him for our well-being. If we really do make loving, serving, and knowing Him our true goal, then we can be content.

So what do we do? Very simply, instead of worrying, we put our trust in Him. We live one day at a time (*"Give us **this day** our **daily** bread"*), seeking first the kingdom of God and loving Him as our first priority. The promise of Scripture is that He will provide for our basic needs (but not necessarily our wants.).

It's sounds simple, but it's very difficult to live out. Jesus says, *"Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need"* (6:33): moment by moment, step by step, seek to do what is right and what honours God. God will care for you.

Pray. Begin with little steps of trust and obedience. Just keep trying to do the right thing with each next step. Keep praying. And you will discover that God is more than faithful in caring for you ...

*You are the place to hide from harm.  
 You are the light that shines in dark.  
 You are the heart's eternal spark.  
 You are the door that's open wide.  
 You are the guest who waits inside.  
 You are the stranger at the door.  
 You are the calling of the poor.  
 You are my Lord and with me from ill.  
 You are the light, the truth, the way.  
 You are my Saviour this very day.  
 Amen.*

Celtic Prayer

#### Thursday, June 29: Matthew 7:1-14

These seem like hard words: *"You can enter God's Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it,"* says Jesus (7:13-14). But the paradox is this:

- The **wide** road leads to a **narrow** life –
  - a life in which you feel defined by what other people think about you.
  - a life in which there is no room for the miraculous or for God.
  - a life in which the most important thing is "me (and only me) first".
  - a life that shrinks to just being about me, mine, and what I want.
  - a life that has no real future ... just a long, slow slide into oblivion ...
- the **narrow** road leads to a huge, expansive, exciting, limitless life –
  - A life that expands to be excited about the Spirit of God moving in the world and His Kingdom bursting into life all around me.
  - A life around which God is constantly at work in miraculous ways. As I pray *"Your Kingdom come, Your will be done,"* I do so expectantly, knowing He is doing things all the time.
  - A life in which, as I live by the principle of *"Love my neighbour as myself"* or *"Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you,"* my life purpose is about loving other people in the name of Jesus. That's a BIG mission field.
  - A life in which what matters is that God loves me. I don't need to worry about what others think about me. I can be "me" in the fullest sense of who our amazing, creative God created me to be. *"You are my beloved,"* God says, *"with whom I am well pleased."*
  - A life that has incredible purpose and meaning now, and anticipates a future with God.

What is Jesus saying to you through these verses?

As we think about what it means to be a follower of Jesus today, in His church, I want to share this thought from Sam Chaise, former General Secretary of Canadian Baptist Ministries (and Frederick Buechner):

*"Eugene Peterson coined this phrase some years ago as the title of a book: 'A Long Obedience in the Same Direction.' It signifies that the faith journey is indeed that, i.e., it is a journey. It's not a once-for-all decision, but an ongoing series of decisions to follow the way of Jesus. I am pondering this as I sit here in the airport, waiting for a flight to Frankfurt and then on to India ..."*

*"One of my co-workers sent me this quote recently, from Frederick Buechner (one of my must-read authors.) and since Buechner always says it better than me, I'll just end this post with the quote:*

*"If you tell me Christian commitment is a kind of thing that has happened to you once and for all like some kind of spiritual plastic surgery, I say you're either pulling the wool over your own eyes or trying to pull it over mine. Every morning you should wake up in your bed and ask yourself: 'Can I believe it all again today?' No, better still, don't ask it till after you've read 'The New York Times,' till after you've studied that daily record of the world's brokenness and corruption, which should always stand side by side with your*

*Bible. Then ask yourself if you can believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ again for that particular day. If your answer's always 'Yes,' then you probably don't know what believing means.*

*"At least five times out of ten the answer should be 'No' because the 'No' is as important as the 'Yes,' maybe more so. The 'No' is what proves you're human in case you should ever doubt it. And then if some morning the answer happens to be really 'Yes,' it should be a 'Yes' that's choked with confession and tears and great laughter."*

Spend some time prayerfully asking God to help you make moment-by-moment decisions to follow Jesus.

"*Can I can believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, today?*" I hope you can answer "Yes" more often than 5/10. Pray for our world. There is a lot of brokenness and corruption. But there are good things, too.

Thank God and pray for those who are genuinely making a difference in our world in the name of Jesus ...

*O Christ, our Morning Star,  
certain hope of a new dawn,  
rise in our hearts, minds, souls, and bodies.  
O Christ, our Morning Star,  
Splendour of Light Eternal,  
Fount of all wisdom and shining with the glory of the rainbow,  
come and waken us from the greyness of our apathy  
and renew in us your gift of hope.  
Amen*

Bede (672-735)

### **Friday, June 30: Matthew 7:15-29**

Wisdom. The Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream, and God said, "*What do you want? Ask, and I will give it to you.*" Solomon prayed, "*Give me an understanding heart so that I can govern your people well and know the difference between right and wrong.*" For who by himself is able to govern this great people of yours?" Scripture notes that the Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for wisdom (1 Samuel 3:5-9).

James writes, "*If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you*"(James 1:5). When you wonder what to pray about, pray for wisdom.

As Jesus teaches us about wide gates and narrow gates, false prophets, and wise and foolish builders, He continues to encourage us to keep our eyes, hearts, minds, and lives focussed on God. To do that requires wisdom. It is so easy to build our lives on things that don't last. We need the foundation that only comes through knowing our loving Father, our Saviour, Jesus, and His guiding empowering Spirit.

James goes on to talk more about godly wisdom: "*If you are wise and understand God's ways, prove it by living an honorable life, doing good works with the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you are bitterly jealous and there is selfish ambition in your heart, don't cover up the truth with boasting and lying. For jealousy and selfishness are not God's kind of wisdom ... But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere. And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness*"(James 3:13-18). Wisdom changes how we live.

- What does it look like to build your "house" – your life – on the rock, Jesus?
- What does it look like to build your "house" – your life – on sand? (What things are "sand"?)

Pray for an understanding heart that knows the difference between right and wrong. Pray for wisdom.

*In the beginning, Lord, I was alone.  
Like the earth before Your spirit moved over the waters,  
I was formless and empty and darkness filled the depths of my heart.  
Then, it was as if You declared, 'Let there be light'.  
And out of the darkness I began to see hope  
Like a shimmering ray of love, breaking through parting clouds.*

*In the beginning, Lord, I was alone,  
but when I saw You in the light, I was no longer afraid.  
You held out Your hand and though I had a choice, I had no choice  
Because to refuse was to embrace, again, the darkness.*

*In the beginning, Lord, I was alone.  
Now I feel again a part of Your creation –  
loved, wanted, needed, family.  
In the light of Your presence  
I hold out my heart that others might glimpse through it Your reflection  
And be drawn from the darkness into Your sunrise.  
Amen.*

Celtic Prayer

### **Saturday, July 1, Canada Day: Psalm 72**

The Motto on the Canadian coat of arms comes from Psalm 72:8: "*From sea to sea.*" The context of that motto is significant. Psalm 72 is a prayer for good government. In Solomon's day, of course, that was centered on the king. In our day, we still need to pray for good government. We are called to "*Pray for all people. Ask God to help them. intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them. Pray this way for kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity*" (1 Timothy 2:1-2). Nowhere does Scripture urge us to insult, make nasty comments about, or bad mouth our leaders (see also [1 Peter 2:11-17](#)). If you feel grumpy, pray. Don't belly-ache.

Today is a good day to pray for our governments (federal, provincial, and city). Pray for our Prime Minister, Premier, and Mayor. Pray for our Member of Parliament and M.L.A.s. Pray for our City councilors. Pray for vision and wisdom among our leaders.

Chris Robertson was the first person in history to travel from bottom of mainland Canada 6,520 kilometres to the top under their own power. En route he challenged over 5 million Canadians to make Canada better by answering the question: "*What will you do in your life to make Canada a better country than when you found it?*" This is a prayer he wrote:

*I'm dreaming of Canada tonight.  
A country where mountains and hopes touch the sky  
A country where an ocean of kindness fills all hearts  
A country where ideas are a forest of wisdom  
Oh God let me wake up in Canada.*

*I'm dreaming of Canada tonight.  
A country where compassion is as tall as a Douglas fir  
A country where understanding is as deep as a great lake  
A country where confidence grows like grain  
Oh God let me wake up in Canada.*

*I'm dreaming of Canada tonight.  
A country where happiness flows like the water of a river  
A country where love is a breath of fresh air  
A country where peace covers the land like snow  
Oh God, please let me wake up in Canada, tonight ...  
Amen*

## Sunday, July 2: Luke 6:1-16

We can get busy. Really busy.

A lot is going on in Jesus' life. Notice the little sentence right in the middle: *"One day soon afterward Jesus went up on a mountain to pray, and he prayed to God all night"* (6:12). I'm thankful Luke chooses to record that little detail during all the other drama and "important" stuff. Jesus models for us that, even when life is intense, we NEED to spend time in prayer. It's not an optional extra.

The real point is not that I spend time "in prayer." The real point is that I spend time talking with, listening to, and worshipping God (and so much more). "Prayer" is just a shorthand way of saying we need to spend time in relationship with the God who loves us, with all that entails.

So ... when life is intense (or is going along quite calmly) spend time with God. Call it "prayer." Call it "talking with God." Call it whatever. Just do it.

- It can be an all night conversation.
- It can be a quick thought/listen/prayer in the middle of a busy day.
- It can be a time of listening to music and worship.
- It can be a time really reflecting on a passage of Scripture.
- It can be a genuine, thoughtful speaking through the prayer below (or the Lord's Prayer).
- It can be a time when you are simply thankful for your blessings.

Spending time in the presence of God is what matters. the form is irrelevant.

*"We must lay before Him what is in us, not what ought to be in us,"* says C.S. Lewis to his friend, Malcolm. There's no point in pretending to be anyone else than we are as we talk with and listen to God.

Today, try consciously, to think about God every few minutes. In your mind just whisper a short prayer of praise or thanksgiving.

If you have a second, briefly talk with Him about whatever you're doing now – thank Him for it, but also pray for wisdom and inspiration.

When a person crosses your mind, pray to God for that person (just a short, "God, be with Lou" is fine).

If the world in general is on your mind or during the news, pray quickly about it (pray for political leaders).

*God's will would I do, my own will bridle.  
God's due would I give, my own due yield.  
God's path would I travel, my own path refuse.  
Christ's death would I ponder, my own death remember.  
Christ's agony would I meditate,  
my love to God make warmer.  
Christ's cross would I carry, my own cross forget.  
Repentance of sin would I make, early repentance choose.  
A bridle to my tongue I would put,  
a bridle on my thoughts I would keep.  
God's judgment would I heed, my own judgment guard.  
Christ's redemption would I seize, my own ransom receive.  
The love of Christ would I feel, my own love give freely.  
Amen.*

Irish Prayer

## Monday, July 3: Luke 9:18-27

When did you first know you would "be" whatever your vocation is (if you have)? If you have been in love, when did you first know that you were in love? If you do believe in Jesus, when did you first know that?

Some of us can identify specific times and places for some of those really important life decisions. We just KNEW – period. Others of us grew into those realizations. We grew into our present vocation. Over time we came to realize that yes, we really did love that person. We may not be able to name the exact spot or date when the transition happened, but we have come to really – deeply – profoundly – believe in Jesus as our Saviour. We know changes have happened, but exactly how and when ... there is a certain mystery to it.

Notice, Jesus is alone – praying, again (9:18). He is praying through some “heavy” issues:

- First, with His disciples, He asks a soul-searching question – a question we all have to wrestle with: “*Who do you say I am?*” Do His disciples understand? Do they get it? Who do you say Jesus is?
- Second, Jesus speaks to the crowd (9:23). This side of Easter His words, “*giving up your own way, taking up your cross daily, and following me*” are so familiar they’re almost comforting. But Jesus is pushing His followers to the limits of commitment. He spoke these words BEFORE anyone had any inkling He would go to the cross. “*Crucifixion*” writes Tom Wright, “*was one of the most horrible fates that humans could devise. That isn’t a modern overstatement. It was the considered opinion of the Roman orator Cicero and the Jewish historian Josephus, two men who had seen plenty of crucifixions ... The point is often made but bears repetition: we in the modern West, who wear jeweled crosses around our necks, stamp them on Bible and prayer books, and carry them in cheerful processions, need regularly to be reminded that the very word ‘cross’ was a word you would most likely not utter in polite society. And if you had actually seen a crucifixion, as many in the Roman world would have, your sleep itself would have been invaded by nightmares as the memories came flooding back unbidden, memories of humans half alive and half dead ...*” Jesus’ words are very disturbing.

When Jesus says, “*If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it, but if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it,*” the people hearing Him thought He might actually mean it. No wonder many walked away. Jesus warns His followers following Him might be very difficult. How do we feel about that? Prayerfully think about ...

- Jesus asks you, “*Who do you say I am?*” how do you answer? How does this change how you live?
- What does it mean for you to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus?
- How do I “*give up my life*” for Jesus’ sake? What does that really mean?

*In the beginning, O God, You shaped my soul and set its weave.  
You formed my body and gave it breath.  
Renew me this day in Your image, the image of Your love.*

*O great God, grant me Your light.  
O great God, grant me Your grace.  
O great God, grant me Your joy this day,  
and let me be made pure through Your Spirit.*

*O Healer of the wounded,  
hear my prayers for those who are hurting ...  
O Saviour of the broken,  
hear my prayers for those who have fallen ...  
O Guide to the wandering,  
hear my prayers for those who are lost ...*

*God before me, God behind me,  
God above me, God beneath me,  
Keep me on Your path, O Lord.  
And be with me, on my way, O God:  
With me in the twistings of the road,  
with me in the currents of the river,  
With me by day, with me by night.  
Amen.*

Philip Newell

## Tuesday, July 4: Luke 9:28-35

In response to Jesus' question, "Who do you say I am?" Peter responds: "You are the Messiah sent from God." Peter gets it.

Then Jesus says some tough words to His disciples (including Peter): "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross daily, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but are yourself lost or destroyed? If anyone is ashamed of me and my message, the Son of Man will be ashamed of that person when he returns in his glory and in the glory of the Father and the holy angels." (9:23-26).

Eight days later, Jesus takes Peter, John, and James up on a mountain. Why? To pray. (Jesus is praying again – this time with friends). Amazing things happen. What do you think this does for their faith?

This is (literally) one of those "mountaintop experiences". Have you ever emotionally, relationally, or spiritually felt on top of the world? Have you had a "high"? Camp? A concert? A retreat? A vacation? Wasn't it wonderful? Wouldn't it have been great if it went on and on ...

Mountaintop experiences may be great times for us to refocus, to be re-inspired, to be recharged, to be re-invigorated, to make new resolutions, to choose new paths, to make essential changes – but you can't live on mountaintops. They are points in time that equip us to go back to the valleys where real life is lived.

I remember one of the weddings I performed. The couple had been planning it for over a year. It was a beautiful service. They had a fantastic reception. They enjoyed a wonderful honeymoon. It was a mountaintop experience (yay.). But then, in a couple of weeks, they realized the "high" was over and the real work – the hard work, exciting work, challenging work, glorious work – of building a marriage had begun. They will always be able to look back at the mountaintop of their wedding, but they have to move on ... Marriage is lived as a day-by-day journey, very much in the present ... (FYI they are doing just fine).

We live life in those "moving on" times – the day-to-day highs and lows of real life. Look back to those mountaintop times and draw encouragement and inspiration from them. Remember the commitments and decisions you made there. But don't live in the past. Remember Jesus is just as much with you today as He was then. The adventure of faith is lived very much in the present moment, step by step ...

*"Faith is not a life of mounting up with wings, but a life of walking and not fainting ... Faith never knows where it is being led, but it loves and knows the One who is leading"* (Oswald Chambers).

*I awake this morning and live this day in Your presence, O God.  
May heaven open wide before me, above me, and around me  
so that I may see You, my Saviour.  
May I see Your Spirit at work in all things on earth this day.*

*Keep Your people safe this day, O God:  
enfold them, surround them, watch over them.  
O God be with them in their hoping,  
in their working, in their playing, and in their dreaming.  
Watch now, O Jesus, over those who are weary, or wandering, or weeping.  
Guide them to a house of Your peace  
and lead me to be a caring for their tears.*

*Every creature, every plant, every rock and every grain of sand  
proclaims the glory of its Creator  
through colour, shape, scent, and form.  
A multi-sensory song of praise.  
Creator God, may we join with the whole of Your creation in praising You, our Creator,  
Amen.*



### Wednesday, July 5: Matthew 19:13-30 and 18:1-5

At most Olympic Games, each participating country produces pins with their flag or other symbol on them. People love to collect them. Some pins are easy to get. Others are notoriously difficult to find. The people who manage to collect a complete set are pretty special (in their own minds, anyway).

This young man seems to be collecting commandments. He's got a pin for keeping/collecting all sorts of them, especially commands 5-9 (see [Exodus 20](#)). Interestingly, Jesus doesn't ask about 2-4 (the commands about not abusing God's name, keeping the Sabbath, and idols) or 10 – the one about coveting: that may or may not be significant (what do you think?). What Jesus does do is challenge the young man about one pin he has yet to collect: to trust in God and God alone (command #1). You could have heard a pin drop.

For this young man his possessions are his idol. He loves them more passionately than he loves anything else. He loves his wealth more than God Himself. He trusts his bank account more than God. Each of us has something in our lives that tempts us to put God on the back burner: Money? Sports? Travel? Retirement? Work? TV? Games?

These are all good things, when kept in proper perspective. But if they control our lives they become bad things. Does Jesus need to challenge us about the idols in our lives. What might we love more passionately than God? What might take precedence over Him?

Jesus challenges us to be like children. Young children don't get hung up on status, wealth, appearance, ethnicity, possessions, or power. Children simply enjoy other children. Everyone is equal. Children depend upon their parents (in a good way). Children trust their loving parents unconditionally, knowing they will care for them always. "Pins" just don't matter.

**Childlike** people are not **childish** people. Childlike people have learned to trust their heavenly Father and follow His wisdom. They are not necessarily going to be the rich, famous, or powerful. But in terms of relationships, they have rewarding lives. These people discover that satisfying lives are built on upside down priorities: we find wholeness when we invest in people, relationships, knowing and serving God. In contrast, those who spend their lives accumulating "stuff" and prestige may find life disappointingly shallow.

1. *"Anyone who becomes as humble as this little child," Jesus says, "is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven" (18:4). Genuine faith recognizes we will never be "good enough," smart enough, or strong enough for God. Authentic faith brings us to God, our heavenly Father, trusting His love, grace, mercy, and care. His wisdom and power works in us and through us.*
2. Jesus challenges us to have a much bigger picture of who is welcome in the kingdom of God – even children (including female children, including non-Jewish children) – in other words, everyone. That was revolutionary back then. *"Anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf is welcoming me ... Beware that you don't look down on any of these little ones ..." (18:5, 10)*

*"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God." says Jesus.*

- Some say there was a tiny gate in Jerusalem called "the Needle" – you had to unload your camel, and it had to crawl through on its knees. This is a great metaphor for how we must come to God. You take off your "load" and get down on your knees. Big problem: there was no such gate.
- Others say the Hebrew word for "camel" is close to the word for "rope." Maybe Jesus meant a rich person getting into God's Kingdom is as tough as getting a rope through a needle's eye?
- Or maybe Jesus is actually talking about a real camel and a real needle's eye? It's not HARD to get a camel through a needle's eye. It's IMPOSSIBLE. That's the point. Jesus' point is that we cannot earn God's favour or our salvation on our own. It's impossible. However, with God, everything is

possible. God can save ANYONE, no matter how far away from Him they seem to be. God specializes in miracles.

- Maybe, as well, Jesus is trying to make us smile, trying to picture this? Jesus has a good sense of humour, after all.

Jesus' point is that we are saved by God's grace – not our possessions, or whatever else we think is most important in life. We are all equal in the kingdom of God.

So, Jesus is reminding us, invest in what really matters: People. God.

Pray for that kind of simple, childlike faith that trusts in Him and Him alone.

*Lord God, help us to love those  
whom we find it difficult to love.  
Give us a heart that reaches out  
to those we would otherwise ignore.  
Give us the strength not to cross  
on the other side of the road,  
but to play the part of the Samaritan.  
This will not be easy, Lord.  
It is not in our nature.*

*We spread our love thinly  
among those we can relate to,  
those who share our values,  
and those who do not threaten  
our comfortable lifestyle.  
It's not easy, Lord,  
and on our own we shall fail.  
But with your help all things are possible.*

*You led the way,  
and it is your example that we look to.  
You turned the values of this world upside down.  
Do the same with us, Lord.  
Help us live the reality of your Love.  
Amen*

John Birch

#### **Thursday, July 6: Matthew 26:36-46**

Jesus knows what's coming:

- *"The Son of Man must suffer many terrible things. He will be rejected by the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He will be killed"* (Luke 9:22).
- *"The Passover begins in two days. the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified"* (Matthew 26:2 – earlier in this chapter as Jesus enters Jerusalem before His arrest and crucifixion).

Crucifixion was what happened to murderers, revolutionaries, and assassins. It was a publicly humiliating, physically excruciating, long-drawn-out way to die. You faced ridicule and abuse from the mob for hours. You endured inconceivable pain. We cannot comprehend the suffering physically, emotionally, or spiritually.

No wonder, then, Jesus says, *"My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death"* (26:38). No wonder He prays to His Father, *"My Father. If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me"* (26:39). This is one of those poignant, unanswered prayers in Scripture. Look again: there is no answer.

In hindsight, we know God is doing profound, amazing things through Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection. But now, there is no answer. Jesus lives with the mystery of praying ... and silence.

Maybe I don't need to worry if my prayers don't seem to be answered. God may be doing things I may never know or understand ...

Ultimately, what does Jesus say? "*Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.*" And He will go forward in confidence knowing that, whatever happens, His Father will get Him through.

In our lives, the "if-it-be-your-will" prayer can be a cop out for not seeking God's wisdom. But at other times, like Jesus, we may need to accept the mystery of not knowing what God is doing, what is best, and what the future holds. We go forward knowing whatever happens our loving Father will get us through.

We can appreciate the torture in Jesus' soul. He knows what's coming. We can also understand His friends experiencing trepidation, fear, and complete confusion. Jesus is doing and saying many strange things ...

There are times in our lives when we sit as the disciples do. It all seems bleak. Confusing. We may even be aware of Jesus' presence with us, but there doesn't seem to be much good news. The future appears grim. Painful. Hopeless. And, like the disciples, we don't know what the next hour, day, or week holds ...

The words the disciples probably missed amongst all the talk of betrayal, desertion and crowing roosters was Jesus' promise: "*After I have been raised from the dead, I will go ahead of you to Galilee and meet you there*" (26:32). "*After I have been **raised from the dead** ...*" Something new, radical, unheard of is about to happen. Jesus will rise from the dead. And He will meet us there ...

Is this a promise that when we die, we will be with Jesus? Yes, absolutely. But the disciples are not dead yet. And they won't be when they meet Jesus in Galilee, either. God is the God of the living, not the dead. Jesus – the One who has been raised from the dead – is here, right now, with you. He always meets you – here. Jesus, the risen King, is walking with you every step of the way. Unlike the disciples, you are not about to lose our Friend (even for a few days). He is with you, always. Everywhere. Through everything.

"*Go ahead and sleep,*" Jesus says, "*Have your rest*"(26:45). You are safe in His care. You are safe in His love. That's good news.

Go ahead and sleep. Have your rest. Pray. God, not my will but yours be done. Be at peace.

*In my journeying with You,  
may I never lose my sense of direction,  
never lose sight of the landmark to which I travel.  
And should cloud or rain obscure my vision, may I draw closer to You  
so that my feet may tread in Your footsteps,  
Your Word be my encouragement and Your love my protection  
against the storms that assail me.*

*Your light is the only light I need  
as I travel through life's mystery.  
Your Word is the only voice I need to hear,  
that still small voice that leads me to the place where I should be.  
Your presence is the only company I need as I walk this narrow road.  
Your fellowship is the warmth I crave to help me on the way.*

*Be with me –  
before me, behind me,  
beside me, above me,  
and beneath me – Lord Jesus.  
Amen.*

Celtic Prayer

## Friday, July 7: John 12:20-36

When I began Grade 1, I looked at the Grade 12 students and thought, *"I'll never make it. I'll never graduate."* But the time came. When I began university, four years for a degree seemed an eternity. But the time came. When Marianne and I got engaged, the wait until the wedding seemed like forever. But the time came. The appointed time comes. It always does.

At the wedding in Cana, Jesus had said, *"My time has not yet come"* (John 2:4). Later Jesus did not want to go up to Jerusalem: *"I'm not going to this festival, because my time has not yet come"* (John 7:30). Now notice John 12:23: *"Now the time has come ..."* *"The time for judging this world has come, when Satan, the ruler of this world, will be cast out. And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself"* (John 12:31-32). The time has come. But this appointed time, Jesus' appointed time, is going to be brutally painful, and excruciatingly difficult. It will also be time-shatteringly, cosmos-shakingly powerful.

John gives us insight into Jesus' emotions during this season of His life. *"My soul is deeply troubled ..."* (12:27). Can you handle a God whose soul is deeply troubled? Jesus may be fully God, but He is also fully human. I find it reassuring that He understands – really understands – the emotions I face when I am facing difficult times in my life. He really does understand. He really can empathize. He really can help.

Jesus says, *"I could pray, 'Father, save me from this hour.'" But what would that accomplish? He has just told us about a seed that must "die" and be buried in order to bear fruit. "This is the very reason I came."* Jesus says (12:27). He goes on, *"Father, bring glory to your name"* (12:28). This is similar to Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane: *"My Father, if it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine"* (Matthew 26:39).

With that prayer, God speaks from heaven. Those who had ears to hear, heard God. Those who assumed God doesn't really exist or think He doesn't really do anything, thought they simply heard thunder.

We have a Saviour who understands. As a fully human person He has been there, done that. *"Because God's children are human beings – made of flesh and blood – the Son also became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death. Only in this way could he set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying ... Since he himself has gone through suffering and testing, he is able to help us when we are being tested"* (Hebrews 2:14-18). That is great news.

Like Jesus, when we face suffering and testing, we can pray, *"Father, save me from this hour."* That's OK. It's very human. He may or may not answer that prayer (remember yesterday's reading).

Do we dare to pray, *"Father, bring glory to your name"*? Is it possible, just possible, that God can bring glory to His name as we are tested? Is it possible, just possible, that God can work things together for the good of His Kingdom and those who love God (Romans 8:28)?

*"Put your trust in the light,"* says Jesus, *"then you will become children of the light."* Pray to trust ...

*Grant us a vision, Lord,  
To see what we can achieve.  
To reach out beyond ourselves.  
To share our lives with others.  
To stretch our capabilities.  
To increase our sense of purpose.  
To be aware of where we can help.  
To be sensitive to Your Presence.  
To give heed to Your constant call.  
Amen*

Welsh prayer

## **Saturday, July 8: John 17:1-26 (focusing today on 17:1-19)**

Jesus prays for us. Back in April, in Genesis 3, we saw a picture of God walking in the garden asking Adam and Eve, "Where are you?" It was a picture of a perfect, open, honest relationship in which God and His people enjoyed free, loving communication. Of course, the people's sinful actions corrupted that.

But God wants to restore that perfect, open, and honest communication, that free and loving relationship. This is good news. Ultimately through Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection that will happen.

This is the theme of Jesus' prayer, recorded in John 17. He wants us to have that beautiful relationship with God restored. The prayer is not easy to read. This is an honest, passionate, spontaneous, stream-of-consciousness prayer that is not divided into neat sections or "cleaned up" by an editor.

Jesus prays this prayer right after His last meal with His disciples. He speaks these words just before He is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, endures two unfair trials, is brutally beaten, and then executed. It is an emotional time. John, an eyewitness/earwitness of all of this, captures Jesus' raw emotion.

Read John 17:1-19 through, a couple of times (it actually helps to read it out loud ... with some emotion).

- What does this prayer say about Jesus'/God's love for us, His people? For you?
- What does this prayer say about our new relationship with God, through Jesus?
- How is this prayer an encouragement to you, today?

Paul writes, *"What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else? Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one – for God himself has given us right standing with himself. Who will condemn us? No one – for Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us"* (Romans 8:31-34).

Jesus is praying – speaking with the Father and Spirit – **FOR** us. He is **FOR** you (not against you). And in His grace and power, He is with you always.

*Be a bright flame before me, O God,  
a guiding star above me.  
Be a smooth path below me,  
a kindly shepherd behind me today, tonight, and forever.  
Alone with none but you, my God, I journey on my way.  
what need I fear when you are near, O Lord of night and day?  
More secure am I within your hand  
than if a multitude did round me stand.  
Amen.*

Columba (521-597)

## **Sunday, July 9: John 17:1-26 (focusing on 17:13-26)**

Does following Jesus mean everything always works out well? That we never have any problems? That life is smooth sailing? Consider John 17:13-19.

Read Romans 8:35-39: *"Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? ... No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow – not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below – indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

Life can be tough, but Jesus is pleading FOR you. God – Father-Son-Spirit are FOR you (Romans 8:34). And you are in God's hands. Always. Nothing and no one can change that.

You are not alone in this crazy, wonderful, difficult, joyful, annoying, exciting, aggravating, thrilling, devastating, challenging life. None of us is to be a Christian "Lone Ranger" facing the world on our own.

You are part of this God-created, God-given gift called "the church" – the community/fellowship/family of people who share your faith in Jesus. We drive one another nuts. We profoundly love one another. We irritate one another. We encourage one another. We hurt one another. We forgive one another. In all our human-ness and weakness, the Spirit gives us the grace to love unconditionally, to forgive unconditionally, to care unconditionally, and to endure unconditionally.

Being in "the church" is not easy. People – even people saved by God's grace – can still be hurtful, dishonest, annoying, and unpleasant (just like us). Our challenge is to continually ask God to help us be more and more like Jesus – to have more love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. To be as gracious and forgiving to others as Jesus is. It is in our unity in Jesus – our love for, care for, and support for one another in the Spirit – that we are strong.

Let's celebrate those things that unite us: our faith in Jesus, belief in salvation that comes through His death on the cross, and commitment to live as His Spirit-filled people. Let's let other things go – things that, as we think about it, really don't matter so much. Jesus prays for us: *"May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me"* (17:3).

May the world know we are Christians by our love. A thought-provoking video version of the song, "May they know we are Christians ..." by Jars of Clay is here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CobNWUXb1M>.

*O God, listen to my prayer.  
I know that You are hearing me as surely as though I saw You with mine eyes.  
Anything that is amiss for my soul,  
may You, O God, sweep it from me.  
And may You shield me in the blood of Your love.*

*Let no thought come to my heart,  
let no sound come to my ear,  
let no temptation come to my eye,  
let no fragrance come to my nose,  
let no fancy come to my mind,  
let no ruffle come to my spirit,  
that is hurtful to my body or ill for my soul.  
May You yourself, O God of life, be at my breast, be at my back,  
You to me as a star,  
You to me as a guide, from my life's beginning to my life's closing.  
Amen*

Celtic Prayer