

INTRODUCTION

When I was a young mother, I loved and enjoyed my children, but I never anticipated the wonder of grandchildren. As they grow into adulthood, I see them, one by one, responding to the gospel and answering Christ's call in the Great Commission. God's Word is not only transforming them but also using them to grow his church. Indeed, God accomplishes far more than we can ask or think. This surely is evident in the passages we will read together this quarter in *Discovery*.

In **Genesis**, God's transformative and redemptive power is at work in Jacob, from the time he flees Canaan to escape his brother Esau until he returns, wealthy and the father of twelve sons. Through them, God will build a nation.

David has military victories in **2 Samuel**, but his reign declines as he falls into sin, and he, his family, and the nation suffer the consequences. Even in the disastrous accounts we will read, God's faithfulness is seen in the birth of David's son, Solomon.

Isaiah's narrative continues with comparisons between oppressive idols of Babylon and Israel's sovereign God. He will again speak of the Servant of the Lord, who will restore not just Israel, but bring salvation to the whole earth.

Through his marriage to Gomar, a prostitute, **Hosea** uses metaphoric language to show us God's relationship with unfaithful, idolatrous Israel. God's unwavering love is shown in a prophetic message that calls his people to repent and receive restoration and blessing.

As he begins his journey to Jerusalem and the cross in **Mark's** passages, Jesus instructs his disciples about himself and God's kingdom through what he says and does. He continues to prepare them for his death and resurrection and displays his power through miracles.

This quarter, the chapters in **Acts** detail the church's expansion among both Jews and gentiles as Paul continues his second and third missionary journeys in Europe.

In the final chapters of **Romans**, Paul offers practical applications for the church to be transformed and live out its faith. As one body in Christ, we are to offer ourselves as living sacrifices, loving one another, honoring each other's gifts in service to God, and building up one another.

Thank God with me for his marvelous Word and for its power to change—not just individuals, but families, communities, and even nations. Praise him for his unfailing love that is at work in and through his people that passes all understanding!

SHARON SACKS, lead editor for *Discovery*, has long been involved in ministry, mentoring children and those young in faith, leading Bible studies, and writing for both children and adults. She has also worked in missions to serve workers in hard places of the world.

Scripture Union's Bible Reading Method

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

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MEMORY VERSES FOR THE MONTH

WEEK 1: In God we make our boast all day long, and we will praise your name forever.

- **Psalm 44:8**

WEEK 2: People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

- **Mark 7:37**

WEEK 3: Shout for joy, you heavens; rejoice, you earth; burst into song, you mountains! For the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.

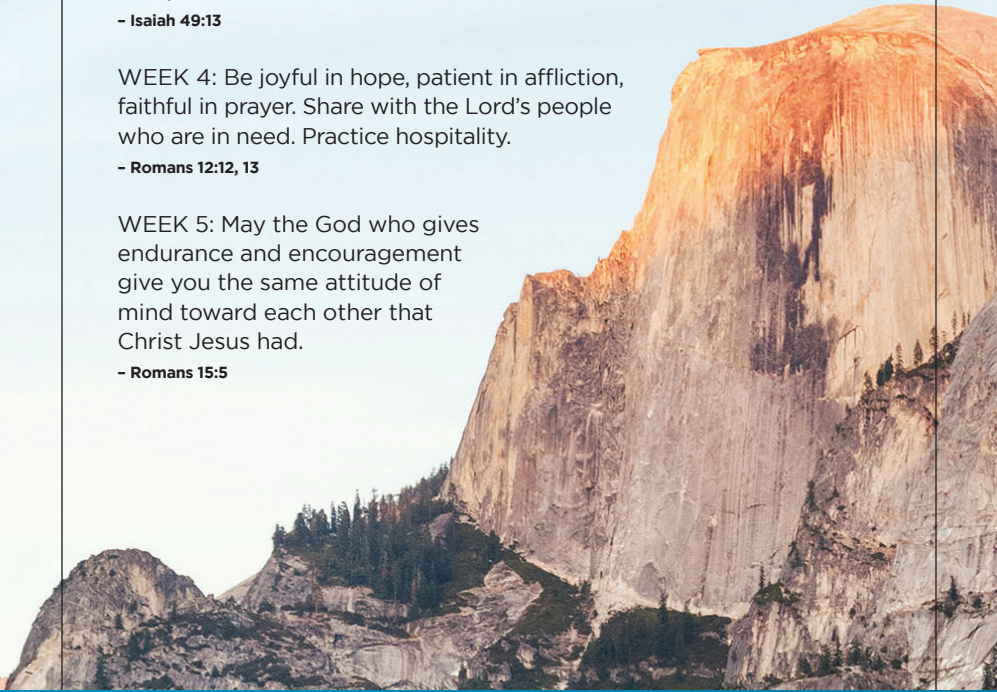
- **Isaiah 49:13**

WEEK 4: Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

- **Romans 12:12, 13**

WEEK 5: May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had.

- **Romans 15:5**



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WHO DOES HE THINK HE IS?

The popular TV series *Who Do You Think You Are?* throws up many surprises for celebrities researching their family tree. The broadcaster Jeremy Paxman was deeply moved to hear that his indomitable great-great-grandmother raised her many children in abject poverty. Composer Andrew Lloyd Webber was delighted to unearth musical talent in his ancestry.

By the age of 12, Jesus had clearly realized his divine origins. He had gradually grown aware of his identity and where his destiny lay. Some people who encountered him mockingly asked, 'Who on earth does he think he is?' Others recognized something in Jesus that they found attractive. Many chose to follow him.

These chapters in Mark's gospel make us pause to wonder at how extraordinary it is for the God of this world to make 'himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness' (Philippians 2:7). In writing this series, I've reflected on how fascinating Jesus is in his deity and humanity. Some titles I've given him may seem disrespectful, but my intention is simply to reflect on God as a fully rounded human being, a first-century Jewish Palestinian who, as God, fully identifies with those of us who are twenty-first-century citizens of heaven.

May you 'see' Jesus in a fresh way through these chapters in Mark's gospel. 'Our God, contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man.'^{*}

^{*}'Proclaiming the Universal Savior', Charles Wesley, 1742.

RO WILLOUGHBY was a commissioning editor with Scripture Union for many years. Now a lay minister at St. Chad's Woodseats, Sheffield, she enjoys the many benefits of life in Sheffield, including the company of family, friends, neighbors, and fellow pilgrims.

THE ELDER BROTHER

PRAY Holy Spirit, help me to hear your voice and respond to what you are teaching me in life-changing ways.

READ **MARK 6:1-13**

REFLECT Who do you think Jesus is? What three roles or titles would you attribute to him?

Years ago, I heard Brother Andrew speak about some Christians under persecution in Eastern Europe. When questioned by authorities about why they were meeting, they replied, 'We're meeting with our brothers and sisters to hear the last will and testament of our elder brother.' In one sense, that is very true! According to the writer of Hebrews, Jesus identified himself as a brother to those who 'are made holy' by God.*

The people in the synagogue in Jesus' hometown may be amazed at Jesus' eloquence and miracles, but this does not compel them to respect or believe him. 'He's very ordinary! We know all about him.' Their statements underline the fact that Jesus had truly become 'one like us', a son, with a skilled trade and named brothers and sisters. What became of his sisters, I wonder.

The people's lack of faith amazes Jesus. He'd laid aside all the glory of heaven, resulting in restrictions upon his exercise of power, though he can still bestow power upon his disciples to heal and cast out demons (v. 13). He prepares them to expect rejection; he had experienced it himself.

APPLY We share the same father and have brothers and sisters in common. What could it mean for you in the next 24 hours to have Jesus as an older brother, taking responsibility for you?

PRAY It amazes me, Jesus, that you would choose to be my brother, loving me more than any earthly brother could. Thank you for your wisdom and power with which you care for me.

*Hebrews 2:10, 11.

JOHN'S COUSIN

PRAY Lord, open my mind to your truth, my heart to your love, and my will to follow you.

READ **MARK 6:14-29**

REFLECT As you read this unsavory story, focus on just how decadently corrupt, abusive, and godless Herod is. What can God say to you through this story?

Some people were saying Jesus was John raised from the dead, others that he was Elijah (vv. 14, 15). John the Baptist was the Elijah prophesied about in Malachi 4:5-6. Jesus himself would identify John as the prophesied Elijah in Matthew 11:14.

John the Baptist and Jesus were related through their mothers. Both had become well known, but their calling and work differed. John looked to the future, since someone more powerful would follow him (1:7), he launched Jesus' ministry through baptism (1:9) and aroused such intense opposition that ultimately it led to a gory death. Jesus was more powerful than John. His teaching also aroused violent opposition, ending in a cruel death; faithful followers buried his body too. Unlike John, Jesus truly was raised from the dead.

Herod Antipas, who ruthlessly ruled in Galilee, was fascinated by Jesus. He associated the cousins with each other, believing Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead. Herod was still guiltily plagued over John's beheading. Luke writes that Herod's wish to meet Jesus was only satisfied at Jesus' trial (Luke 23:8, 9). Neither John nor Jesus courted fame or power. They knew the message from God they had to announce that called sinners to come to Christ in faith, live holy lives, and enter the kingdom of God. Their 'celebrity' status was costly.

APPLY We are called to holy living in our unsavory and broken world. It may be costly.

PRAY Lord Jesus, even today, help me to be faithful in my calling to follow in your footsteps, no matter what the cost.

FOODBANK PROVIDER

PRAY Holy Spirit, as I receive the message you show me in Scripture today, cause your fruit to multiply and flourish in my life.

READ **MARK 6:30–44**

REFLECT Imagine yourself walking with family and friends some distance to see this miracleworker. What role would each play as you listen all day and are then fed well?

If you'd been in the crowd, what one thing might you always remember? The chase, anticipating where Jesus' boat would land? Spending time with Jesus all day and listening to his teaching? Feeling hungry and anxiously wondering how you'd get home? Watching Jesus give thanks, break bread, and then everyone has enough to eat? Amazement at how much was left?

Throughout this day, Jesus reveals so much of his character, far more than just feeding over 5,000 people. He's a leader who desires to spend quality time with his followers (vv. 30, 31)—the most compelling human being anyone could ever meet (v. 33); a riveting teacher who shares the mind of God with those who will listen (v. 34); a pastor with the power and compassion to meet human need (v. 37); a miracle-worker who makes sure everyone is satisfied (v. 42) with more than enough to go around (v. 43) because of his generous heart. What else could you add to the list? (You might add, as John does, a popular figure who refuses to lead a revolt against the Roman authorities.)

APPLY Who is Jesus? Take one of his characteristics revealed in this story. What does this aspect of Jesus mean to you as you pray and meet with him?

PRAY Holy Spirit, continue to show me more of who Jesus is. Help me to learn from the love and compassion he showed, from the authority and power he exhibited. As you teach me, help me to be more like him in all that I do.

WATER STRIDER

PRAY Thank you, Lord, for the power to grow, which you have placed in every living thing. Give me eyes to notice it and a heart to wonder at it.

READ **MARK 6:45-56**

REFLECT Pause to reflect. What troubles you most about our polluted, broken world?

Where air meets water, liquid water molecules are attracted to one another. This creates surface tension, like an elastic membrane. Long-legged insects like water striders, spreading their weight over a larger area, don't break the surface of the water. They appear to glide. (It's a bit more complicated!) Ever wondered how Jesus could walk on top of water? Did he get wet feet?

He sends his disciples out on the lake, where they end up in a tempestuous storm, without him. In due course, he strides towards them. Immediately, the wind dies down. How come? At the beginning of time, Jesus was involved in creating the world. He knows how water, surface tension, and storms work.

More obviously, as God, he can do what no human being can. His statement to the disciples, 'It is I' (v. 50), the Greek saying, 'I am', resonates with God's self-disclosure to Moses from the burning bush—'I AM WHO I AM' (Exodus 3:14). The disciples have an advantage over Moses because it is Jesus who makes the Creator God visible, stepping onto water to be seen by them in their distress.

APPLY So many creatures live in or rely on rivers and seas (including water striders). The Lord of creation has charged us with the care of these habitats.

PRAY Lord God, have mercy on this beautiful but now polluted planet you have created. Show me how I can do my part in caring for it.



FOR A ROYAL WEDDING

PRAY Lord Jesus, you opened the Scriptures so that the disciples saw you in the Old Testament.* Please open this psalm to me in the same way.

READ **PSALM 45**

REFLECT The institution of marriage has changed over the centuries and is hotly debated. In what ways do you see the importance of faith within a marriage attracting less interest today?

Every message on a wedding card contains warm, appreciative comments. The bride and groom are the prince and princess on this one day. This song is no exception. Possibly, it is composed for King Solomon marrying yet another foreign wife. As such, it is culturally weighted.

More is made of his virtues than hers. As God's representative, he's challenged to rule well, being faithful to God (v. 4), for his throne is ultimately God's (v. 6). Solomon's descendants did belong to an eternal line, which is why the writer of Hebrews, when referring to Christ, quotes verses 6 and 7 (Hebrews 1:8, 9).

The royal bride is told to reject the gods of her own people (v. 10). Jezebel, King Ahab's wife, is one example of failing to do so, for she turned her husband's heart away from the Lord to serve her foreign gods (1 Kings 16:31-33; 21:25, 26). In sharp contrast, Ruth, another foreign bride, rejected the gods of her dead first husband and eventually gave birth to the royal line of David (Ruth 1:16).

Marriage today is different from the way this writer understands it. For a start, in most countries, polygamy is unlawful. In Christian marriage, husband and wife are both accountable to God and called to foster the flourishing of faith and trust in him (Ephesians 5:21).

APPLY Pray for those preparing for their marriage.

PRAY Lord Jesus, I lift up to you Christian marriages. Help them to reflect your relationship with your bride, the church, to testify to your grace and mercy.

*Luke 25:45.

RULE INTERPRETER

PRAY Father, thank you that in whatever you call me to do today, you are with me, providing everything I need to do your will and be a blessing to those around me.

READ **MARK 7:1-8**

REFLECT Are you a natural rulekeeper, or do you find rules irksome?

A recent podcast compared hand-washing dishes with using a dishwasher. Which is more environmentally friendly, more effective, more costly, or more convenient? The dishwasher won on all counts, but with conditions. It depends on washing for a longer time at a lower temperature, rinsing dirty plates in water first, and only running a program when full. I wasn't convinced! Who knows best?

In general, according to the Old Testament, the only specific washing instructions were for priests in the performance of their duties (Exodus 30:19-21). Everyone else became understandably unclean if, for example, they touched some form of bodily fluids (Leviticus 15:11). However, in Jesus' time, many of the Jewish authorities were less concerned with matters of hygiene than they were about ritual purity to maintain a distinctiveness from gentiles and certain Jewish sects.

The Pharisees lived with complicated cleanliness rules, which Jesus often broke, about mixing with tax collectors (2:14) and gentiles (7:24-37)—even touching corpses (5:41). And don't you love how he defended his disciples? Being God, he wasn't bound by 'the tradition of the elders' (v. 3). He authoritatively interpreted the prophet Isaiah's words, calling out empty worship. Jesus invites people to abide by the rules of the kingdom of God.

APPLY What attitudes in society do you currently struggle to understand in light of the rule of God?

PRAY Holy Spirit, help me look to you for wisdom when I am torn between society's norms and what I am called to as a Christian.

PERCEPTIVE TEACHER

PRAY Lord, please show me what in my life is truly precious and what is comparatively worthless.

READ **MARK 7:9-23**

REFLECT Spend some time reflecting on Psalm 51:10: 'Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.'

Jesus hasn't finished with cleanliness regulations. He addresses the Pharisees, the crowd, and his disciples. Notice his different approaches. With the Pharisees, he compares the words of Moses with their regulations. Read verses 10-13 out loud to capture Jesus' accusatory 'You'. Righteously forceful, he has swept away their traditions, which have the opposite effect from their original intention. He criticizes the Pharisees for their focus on complying with the law in a way that negates its spirit, as evidenced by their withholding support for parents. Thus, they dishonor their parents, breaking God's fifth commandment.

Jesus addresses the crowd, which may or may not have included his accusers. He wants everyone to understand something radically challenging. By eating with unclean hands (v. 2), his disciples would never have made themselves unclean inside. Impurity is harbored in the inner being (v. 15).

Finally, to explain how impure thoughts can lead to a long list of destructive behaviors, he takes his disciples aside. They are among those who are most receptive to his teaching. He knows what he needs to say. He doesn't shy away from speaking the hard truth.

APPLY Pray for those who preach God's Word week by week. Following Jesus' example, they need God's wisdom not only to discern what comes from a pure heart in what they say, but also to assess their audience's receptivity.

PRAY Lord Jesus, keep my mind and heart focused on you, on what pleases you and brings honor to your name.

A FRIEND OF GENTILES

PRAY As I come into your presence today, Lord, I lift up to you those close to me, especially those who do not know Christ.

READ **MARK 7:24-30**

REFLECT Remember how the Pharisees respond to Jesus in verses 1 to 23. Ask God to help you marvel at today's contrasting response to him.

Jesus has swept aside the regulations of the Pharisees. Now, probably wanting to escape their fierce opposition and maybe even Herod's sinister interest in him (6:14), he travels to the gentile area around Tyre, on the coast of modern-day Lebanon. Mark even suggests Jesus wants to hide (v. 24). In Jewish eyes, he is discovered by the most unacceptable person possible—an 'unclean' woman, a Greek gentile, from the deeply pagan area of Syrian Phoenicia.

She hasn't come to criticize. All that comes out of her heart (v. 21) is a desperate and bold request. Jesus tells her she is not a priority and even infers she's a dog. (The Greek word suggests a little dog, like a pet.) Astonishingly, she's not offended but accepts his primary Jewish calling and claims her own right to his attention. What a contrast to the hostility of the Jews!

The woman's daughter is restored to wholeness. Far more than that, Jesus has forever commended her with the words, 'Woman, you have great faith!' (Matthew 15:28). Martin Luther wrote, 'She took Christ at his own words. He then treated her not as a dog but as a child of Israel.*'

APPLY Jesus, knowing this woman's background, still accepted her and gave her far more than she expected. Pray for anyone you know who feels second-class in God's eyes, asking that they hear Jesus' words of acceptance and affirmation.

PRAY Please give me your heart, Jesus, as I relate to people around me. Help me to see each one as you do and to treat them with understanding and compassion.

*R Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1950).

HOPED-FOR HEALER

PRAY Father in heaven, thank you that I can come to your Word expecting your Spirit to instruct, encourage, and convict me through it.

READ **MARK 7:31-37**

REFLECT How do you imagine the day when the glory of the Lord is finally fully revealed?

Jesus now travels 120 miles into gentile territory, going up the Mediterranean coast to Sidon, then down to the ten Graeco-Roman cities, east of Lake Galilee. His fame has gone ahead of him. People bring a deaf-and-mute man to be touched by Jesus (v. 32). Wanting privacy, Jesus leads the man away from the crowd. Once more, Jesus becomes ritually 'unclean', engaging with and touching a gentile man, then placing spit on his tongue. The man must have seen Jesus looking to heaven, the source of his power to heal, but hears nothing until...he hears Jesus' voice and his own!

The Greek word for 'could hardly talk' (v. 32) only appears once more in the Bible, in the Greek Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament), in Isaiah 35, a chapter that rejoices in the future day when the glory of the Lord will be revealed.

In earlier chapters, God's wrathful judgment on Israel's neighbors has been foretold, nations that have defied God. Is Mark presenting Jesus, the restorer of speech and hearing, as the beginning of the fulfillment of that expected day of the Lord when Jews and gentiles alike will see God's glory?

APPLY God still heals today. Occasionally, someone's hearing is restored. For many deaf people, deafness is part of their identity. But on the day of the Lord, nothing will hinder their hearing or speech. Pray for anyone you know who's deaf.

PRAY Lord Jesus, I lift up to you those who do not yet know you. Please give them ears that really listen to and hear your life-giving message.*

*Matthew 11:15 (The Message).

CROWD CONTROLLER

PRAY Father, please keep me mindful of your presence, focused on your purposes, and aware of your pleasure as I seek to serve you today.

READ **MARK 8:1-13**

REFLECT Why do you think the story of feeding the 5,000 is better known than the feeding of the 4,000? Ask God to speak to you today.

When attending a large sporting event or festival, I'm aware of how it's organized. Officials speak into walkie-talkies; certain routes are closed off; notices dictate crowd behavior; tickets are checked; bags are searched; cameras are everywhere!

Unlike in the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus makes the first move in taking charge of the crowd of 4,000. He notices they are hungry after having been with him three days—a devoted, long-suffering crowd in a remote spot, probably still in a gentile region. He cares very deeply for them (vv. 2, 3). What do you notice about how Jesus relates to this crowd? Why hasn't he observed their hunger earlier? Did they not intend to stay so long?

He provides for their well-being. They are satisfied (v. 8). We don't know what this crowd makes of his teaching, unlike the crowd of 5,000 (John 6:15). But he doesn't dictate how they choose to respond. His return across the lake, to be confronted yet again by his Jewish critics, emphasizes that Jesus does not control how people believe in him, whether Jew or gentile. Note, he himself refuses to be controlled. He won't provide proof of his identity on demand.

APPLY Pray for someone you know who is a Christian but finds it difficult to accept Jesus' compassion for them, or for someone who has not yet put their trust in him.

PRAY Jesus, thank you for the ways you make your love real for me, both in Scripture and in my faith walk with you.

DISAPPOINTED MENTOR

PRAY Father, I am thankful that you speak to me, teaching and encouraging me when I read your Word. Thank you for this wondrous gift that shows me who you are and your great love for me.

READ **MARK 8:14-21**

REFLECT Are you good at recognizing where God's at work? Are you slow to connect the Word of God with your everyday life? Is anything obstructing your growth in faith?

Some people take to driving a car as the proverbial duck takes to water; others are almost paralyzed by anxiety; others are just slow to learn and build up confidence; and some never learn.

Jesus is disturbed by the Pharisees' refusal to give him a fair hearing (v. 12), and he's frustrated by the disciples' slowness to understand. Is there a difference between the two? Ironically, this discussion begins because one loaf of bread is not enough to feed a boatful. Someone has forgotten to bring lunch. They've all forgotten Jesus is in the boat. They've all forgotten how Jesus can provide enough bread for all. Would Jesus perform another miracle, or find another solution? We don't know. Like the Pharisees who are bound by material regulations, the disciples are bound by material things, not the spiritual bread of life. They are slow learners, spiritually short-sighted.

APPLY A few Pharisees put their faith in Christ. Filled with the Holy Spirit after Pentecost, Jesus' disciples were emboldened in faith. Pray for yourself and anyone you know who's a slow learner when it comes to trusting Jesus.

PRAY Thank you, Jesus, for meeting me where I am and never leaving me. Thank you for continually proving your faithfulness to me, building my faith, and strengthening my testimony for you.



THE EYE OF THE STORM

PRAY Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of rest. Let my thoughts, my words, and my actions reflect your love today.

READ **PSALM 46**

REFLECT How troubled are you by current global challenges to life on earth? Are you tempted to wonder if God is powerless?

Our ears and eyes are regularly assaulted by drought, floods, famine, mudslides, melting polar icecaps, rising sea levels, and changing weather patterns. Recent wars have released global insecurity and cataclysmic devastation. We are faced with the malign forces of nature and the brutal forces of war. Psalm 46 could well be describing our world (vv. 1-3, 6). The psalmist is not urging people to have faith in God but is raising the question whether the God they have put their faith in can be trusted. What evidence for confidence do you find here?

Interestingly, the Hebrew for 'break of day' (v. 5) is the same phrase for the time Moses called the walls of the Red Sea to collapse (Exodus 14:27), evidence of God's power over both the natural world and the might of the enemy, in this case, the Egyptian army. Moses' and Miriam's subsequent songs graphically describe God's power (Exodus 15:7-11, 21). This psalm has other resonances with that Red Sea escape.

God calls us to be still, to experience his presence in the eye of the storm, a refuge in the center of a hurricane.

APPLY Think of one war zone that troubles you or a natural disaster that distresses you. Plead with God to intervene.

PRAY I offer you praise, Mighty God, for there is nothing over which you do not have control, nothing for which you do not deserve my trust.

HANDS-ON HEALER

PRAY Creator and Sustainer of heaven and earth, I am amazed that you are mindful of me. Thank you for your loving care.

READ **MARK 8:22–26**

REFLECT Read Mark 6:1 to 8:21 again to remind yourself of your reflections in Mark.

As I've written these reflections, I have noticed how the gospel writer finds links between incidents and the words of Jesus.

For example, he traces the theme of rejection and unbelief with opportunities for gentiles to hear Jesus' message and not just Jews. He includes two contrasting feeding miracles. This sight-restoring story relates to the blindness of faith in the previous discussion and to Thursday's hearing-restoration story (7:31–37). These two healing miracles are the only ones in Mark that don't also appear in Matthew and Luke. What similarities are there between the two?

In Mark's gospel, Jesus lays his hands on or touches someone more than in any other gospel. In all but one case, it's in the context of healing. Here, rather beautifully, he privately takes the man by the hand. Then he touches his eyes in two stages, initially applying his spit. Unlike in 7:34, he doesn't command the man to see. Unusually, he asks a question in the style of those in 8:17–21, as though probing the man's experience and understanding. Is Mark presenting Jesus' question here (v. 23) as one he might ask of anyone, Jew or gentile? 'Do you see anything?' Partial vision can turn into faith-filled clarity.

APPLY This is the last reflection on these chapters of Mark's gospel. If Jesus were to ask you, 'Have you seen anything?', what would you say?

PRAY Holy Spirit, as I thank you for all you have shown me through these reflections in Mark, I ask that you help me to apply and put into practice what I have seen.

COMFORT AND HOPE

Prophets announced their message publicly to whoever would listen. The book of the prophet Isaiah, commonly known as the ‘fifth gospel’, can be divided into three sections, each with a particular theme or flavor and therefore with its own distinct tone. Although there are questions about the book’s authorship, several linguistic, structural, and thematic features suggest its overall unity within the prophetic tradition. The book must be understood in the context of the exile—before, during, and after. In this series, we will be delving deeper into ‘Second Isaiah’: the book of comfort.

Isaiah brings the message of the ‘Holy One of Israel’ to his people. The message is one of comfort and hope to a people who are beaten down, tempted, and oppressed. Could it be true that rescue and release are at hand or even possible? Although Isaiah delivers a message of restoration, it is not without challenging words: an unfaithful, unbelieving nation has lost sight of its role in the world, and tensions between God and Israel have become apparent.

As you read Isaiah, sit with the prophet’s words, no matter how sharp and prickly they might be, not forgetting the message that he wants to deliver: God’s faithfulness and goodness have been tasted, which means that he can be trusted for the future. Be prepared to broaden your horizons and extend your vision!

NUDRAT MALIK, a Pakistani Christian immigrant, has only recently started describing herself as Asian British, despite having lived in England for most of her adult life. She lives with her family in Buckinghamshire, where she enjoys a recently discovered love of gardening.

ME, MINE, MYSELF

PRAY There is no one like you, O Lord. Open my eyes to your greatness and mighty power. I adore you—the true, living God and the eternal King.*

READ **ISAIAH 46**

REFLECT Listen to any contemplative or instrumental music of your choice.

The human condition is such that we have an overwhelming desire to control and order things our way. In a modern, busy, and sometimes chaotic life, it is much easier to deal with the gods that we construct and control. The notion of a personal God who is relational brings with it demands and unpredictability, which may be too much to handle. The gods of our own making, depicted in our own way, using our own treasures—surely this is what we want: a situation in which we are at the center. We become gods! These gods give us comfort because we can see them where we put them, we control them, we put them in a box: predictable and comfortable.

And that is precisely the opposite of what our Creator, Savior God is! He is a personal God who responds to us, has a relationship with us (v. 4). This passage is an invitation to identify those gods that we have chosen, shaped, decorated, and then put in a spot of our choosing, going to any lengths to maintain our control. Isaiah wants us to acknowledge all the situations in which we put ourselves in control and to reflect on what we fear.

APPLY Make a list of things, situations, or habits that put you in control. These may be leaving little room for a relational God in your everyday life.

PRAY Father, may your kingdom come in my life; forgive me if I have put anything or anyone before you, and help me to have you in the forefront of everything about me.

*Jer 10:6, 10.

FAITHFULNESS TO OBEDIENCE

PRAY Father, you are the only one who can meet my every need, even those of which I am unaware. Thank you for your loving care.

READ **ISAIAH 48:1-11**

REFLECT Recall some of the good things God has done in your life.

Not only do the Scriptures tell us about God, they also tell us about ourselves and our humanity: broken, damaged, fickle, and ungrateful. In Isaiah's words, the Holy One of Israel is proving himself to the house of Jacob by telling the 'new' and 'unknown' things to come because they have failed to recognize who he is and what he has done. This zealous defense shows God to be One who tests, is patient, yet jealous. With its tendency to take control, Israel seems to have forgotten its relationship to the Lord Almighty. Are we any different?

Eugene Peterson, in his introduction to the book of Isaiah in *The Message*, writes, 'Isaiah involves taking the stuff of our ordinary and often disappointing human experience and showing us how it is the very stuff that God uses to create and save and give hope... nothing is unusable by God.' Could it be that we, too, have forgotten to recall the experiences of our lives, which are an essential witness to God's faithfulness? May it be that reliving something jubilant or traumatic imprints the important message deep within: the Holy One is faithful and able to save!

APPLY Look at a photo or postcard of an occasion—happy or sad—a trip, or a person. Is it possible to share this with your close family so that the blessing can be remembered or relived?

PRAY As I reflect on significant memories, Father, thank you for the many evidences of your presence and faithfulness to me.

IF ONLY...

PRAY Spirit of God, as I read Scripture today, give me a deeper understanding. Help me embrace and apply what you teach me.

READ **ISAIAH 48:12-22**

REFLECT ‘God acts through human actions—without turning people into puppets.’ (Christopher J. H. Wright)

It’s clear that God lives with a huge ‘if only’ in his relationship with Israel. If only... if only Israel had listened and believed the One who ‘laid the foundations of the earth’ and told them ‘these things’ (vv. 13, 6). This refrain rings out clearly in this passage. The Holy One of Israel is proving that he is God Almighty, One who should not be ignored. Yet Israel continues to overlook her Redeemer, the Lord.

Here, Isaiah brings his message to the people by explaining the loss they have suffered; they have forfeited the blessings that would have been theirs. Isaiah is pointed but plain—Israel herself has become the biggest hindrance to experiencing continual and numberless blessings because she has failed to acknowledge God in relation to her very existence; yet God continues to appeal to Israel! In the words of Jo Bailey Wells, ‘God neither insists on his way nor desists from loving them’.*

Now that this tug-of-war relationship is exposed, Isaiah makes it clear that one party is never going to give up in his faithfulness: the Holy One of Israel.

APPLY Think about the image of a taut rope being pulled by God on one side and you on the other. Linger here for a while. What have you realized about yourself?

PRAY Surely, Father, you have proved your constant love and faithfulness to me. Forgive me for those times when my actions showed I was neglecting you and forgetting who you call me to be.

*J Bailey Wells, Isaiah: *The People’s Bible Commentary* (Bible Reading Fellowship, 2006).

GOD'S JUSTICE ON EARTH

PRAY Father, keep me ever mindful of your presence and committed to bringing you glory in all that I say and do.

READ **ISAIAH 49:1-13**

REFLECT Read Psalm 136 in two different translations.

This is a picture of redemption, of salvation; one that is extended to all and encompasses all, especially the beaten down, afflicted ones. It is a hope-filled passage for those who have faced challenging times. One cannot ignore the very physical nature of the afflictions: captives, those in darkness, hungry and thirsty (vv. 9, 10), all things that we still see. Food pantries and food banks may be part of how redemption is announced to those who need it today, and the reality is that the world is unjust for so many.

Many Christian communities have become experts in attending to physical needs, but sometimes have been hesitant to ask the more pertinent questions about the afflictions: Captives of what? What is the nature of the darkness? Hungry and thirsty for what? We need to look deeper.

Today's passage ends with a note of hope: God comforts his people and has compassion on those who suffer (v. 13). He is a gracious God.

APPLY Listen, really listen, to the captive who has just been freed or that person who has stepped out of darkness. Reflect on God's compassion as you listen to their stories.

PRAY Lord, give me wisdom to meet the needs of others in ways that you call me to, in ways that point them to you and bring you glory.

UNBELIEVABLE!

PRAY As I read your Word today, Father, I ask that you use it to enlarge my vision for serving you and sharing with others who you are.

READ **ISAIAH 49:14-26**

REFLECT Listen to one of the following pieces of music using an online search: 'The Lark Ascending' by Ralph Vaughan Williams, or 'A Change Is Gonna Come' by Sam Cooke.

Impossible things are done: exile to restoration. Unbelievable things happen because of the sovereign Lord. In this passage, Isaiah urges the reader to look beyond the current painful experience and maintain an upward, hopeful perspective. The people felt that God had forgotten and forsaken them (v. 14), but God never forgets us: as 2 Timothy 2:13 reminds us, God remains faithful even when we are faithless.

Living in the moment, being present with all our senses, might be one way to manage and counter anxiety. But it could be argued that there are times when living in the moment, being present in the here and now, does no good. We know that people need to move forward and look ahead.

And yet, trauma must have been an ever-present companion with the children of Zion. In such circumstances, we should hold fast in the hope that God, the Redeemer, will prevail (vv. 25, 26). Unbelievable things can happen, and will happen, because of the Sovereign Lord who is prepared to make them happen!

APPLY Recall a time when something seemingly impossible or unbelievable happened, and thank God for what he did and who he is.

PRAY God of the impossible, help me remember that you are always with me and are greater than any challenge I face.



TO COME

PRAY Lord Jesus, thank you for the gift of your church and for paying a great price so that I could be a part of it. Please accept my worship today.

READ **PSALM 47**

REFLECT Whom do you love most in the world? Call to mind their face, their voice, and thank God for them—and, as much as you already love them today, ask him to help you love them more.

There is a wonderful diversity of people in this psalm—count up how many times it says ‘all’ and ‘the nations’. Does your church reflect something of this diversity?

Frequently in the Old Testament, God—or one of his prophets—reminds the people that they were chosen, not because they were particularly beautiful, special, or righteous, but because God loved them (e.g., v. 4; Deuteronomy 7:7, 8). How frequently God’s people have shown themselves undeserving of that love!

One of my favorite hymns begins, ‘My song is love unknown ... love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be’.* How deeply do you believe that truth? Do you try to prove yourself, to earn God’s love, to show yourself to be beautiful and deserving of his love? Can you accept that God doesn’t love people because they are beautiful, but makes people beautiful by loving them? And he doesn’t only love people like us. In verse 9, who assembles to exalt God? Perhaps this is why God called Daniel to serve even proud and stubborn kings—for he loved them too.

APPLY If God makes you beautiful by loving you, how can you, in a small but important way, love others in turn—even those not like you? Think of someone who doesn’t yet know God—how can you show them God’s love?

PRAY Lord, I pray for those around me who do not yet know you. Please show them your power and love so they will join me in praise and thanksgiving for who you are and what you have done.

*‘My Song is Love Unknown’, Samuel Crossman 1664.

AWAKE, AWAKE!

PRAY Father, please speak to me through your Word and continue to teach me your ways.

READ **ISAIAH 51**

REFLECT Justice, light, righteousness, and hope are words used here to remind us of what salvation will look like.

I wonder if this passage brings any comfort to those who are living in constant fear, those who experience the wrath of the oppressor bent on destruction. If this text tells us anything, it is a description of the world as it is: where people experience the injustice of living in fear, where one human being will oppress another just because they are determined to do so, and where death is a reality that brings everything to an end.

As surely as this reality needs to be acknowledged, so does the salvation of the Lord, who seems equally bent on working out his rescue plan, a way to rebuild that which is destroyed, restore that which is fruitless. In this, the physical earth is not forgotten: deserts are made into Eden, wastelands into gardens (v. 3). If there ever was a call to keep perspective when things go wrong, this is it! These prophetic writings are here so that we can remember what the important things are. Isaiah, like the other prophets, brings a new awareness of the reality of God's involvement in everyday life—not bound by our definition of time and space.

APPLY What role, if any, are you playing or are willing to play—in partnership with God—to bring about justice, light, and comfort?

PRAY Merciful God, help me hold nothing back as I seek to serve you. You held nothing back in securing my redemption; you deserve nothing less than my everything.

LOVE PRACTICALLY

When the Christians at Rome first received Paul's letter to the Romans, I wonder if they settled down to listen to it in one session. It would have been quite a heavy session, requiring great powers of concentration! Or did they break it up into, say, three sessions? If so, the last third of the letter, which is the five chapters we are looking at, would have been the most practical and the easiest to follow.

These chapters follow Paul's detailed explanation of God's good news of Jesus Christ. Then Paul takes a big breath and says, 'Therefore...' (12:1). He spells out in straightforward language how he expects Christians to respond. He urges us all to live consistent lives of distinctive Christian character. In other words, the theme of our readings is, one way or another, 'love': loving behavior toward our fellow believers, our neighbors, and even our enemies.

This love that Paul speaks of is genuine and active. It includes being a team player in the church and a good citizen in the state. It is strong under pressure and gentle with the sensitive. It is discerning, principled, and disciplined. It is warm-hearted and affectionate. And, as the letter comes to an end, the great apostle begins to step out of the pages and meet us as a sympathetic, caring, and very human Christian leader.

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RESPONDING TO GOD

PRAY All praise and honor belong to you, Lord God. In all that I am and do, help me to bring you glory.

READ **ROMANS 12:1-8**

REFLECT 'Come!' is the gentle but firm invitation from the Lord to us. As you come to the Bible today, also come to the Lord himself.

'I think what you need is Romans Chapter 12 verse 1.' No one had ever spoken to me like that before. I was a typical 15-year-old with an uncomplicated trust in Christ. I was on a Christian skiing holiday, and the leader and I were chatting. I was curious to discover what he meant, and we looked up Romans 12:1 together. I read that I needed to make a present of myself to God.

This is what the apostle Paul was looking for from the Christians in Rome in response to all God's mercies (v. 1). The simple act and attitude of giving ourselves to God expresses the gratitude of our hearts and releases us to act on it in our lives. We shall find we can have a sturdy independence from the attitudes of the world around us (v. 2), a more objective assessment of ourselves (v. 3), and a much greater usefulness in the mission and ministry of Christ's church (vv. 4-8).

When it comes to using our abilities and gifts in God's service, Paul urges us to play our part with heart and soul. And that includes 'generously', 'diligently', and 'cheerfully' (v. 8).

APPLY Think of other Christians in your church/fellowship as fellow team members, with their own tasks and specialisms, complementing and belonging to each other. How might you encourage them?

PRAY Lord Jesus, thank you for your church; thank you for the congregation in which you have placed me and for the ways you call me to serve in it. Help me to be faithful in using the gifts you have given me.

WHAT TO DO AND NOT TO DO

PRAY There is no God like you, Lord, who pardons sin and forgives transgression. Thank you for not staying angry forever but showing mercy to me.*

READ **ROMANS 12:9–21**

REFLECT We must be doers of the Word, not merely readers.

This is one of the Bible's most practical passages. It mentions about 21 things to do, and 7 things not to do. Its meaning is mostly straightforward. The hard part is living it out.

Overall, good Christian living is about love (v. 9), and, as the passage makes clear, it must be sincere, practical, and resilient. In a loving church, Christians will have a mutual commitment to and respect for one another (v. 10). Love will be hard work sometimes: for example, when entertaining visitors or refugees, when helping at a food bank, or when there is opposition or suffering. This love needs to develop stamina, if we are to keep keen in the Lord's service, including praying for others. Paul knows what it's like. We need to refuel spiritually and let our hope of glory cheer us (vv. 11–13)!

Love means doing good to our enemies too, never retaliating or seeking revenge (vv. 17, 19, 20). Our response to evil in the world is not to add to it, but to abhor it and replace it with good (vv. 9, 20, 21). We want to be a blessing to everyone, even to those who reject us. Love includes sympathizing with people, not being superior, and living at peace with everyone we can (vv. 14–16, 18).

APPLY Select two or three imperatives in the passage that you think may be the Lord's message for you to act on in the coming days.

PRAY Holy Spirit, please instill in me not only the desire but the will to actively love others with the love of Christ—humbly, wholeheartedly, and sacrificially.

*Mic 7:18.

GOD'S PUBLIC SERVANTS

PRAY O God, my Rock, I praise your perfect works and just ways. I trust in you—a faithful, upright, and just God who does no wrong.*

READ **ROMANS 13:1-7**

REFLECT Resolve that the next few minutes will be a good investment. Make the most of the time, absorbing something of God's Word.

'What do you do?' the hitchhiker asked the driver who had stopped to pick him up. 'I'm in public service,' the man replied, with a marked Welsh accent.

The driver was the then Speaker of the British House of Commons, George Thomas. 'Public servants' is how we often describe our politicians, police, judges, administrators, etc., and so they are. It is a noble calling. In our passage, we find that they are not just servants of the public but 'servants of God' (vv. 4, 6).

God has given them authority to govern, maintain order, administer justice, commend those who do right, and punish those who do wrong. God has set this up for the common good (vv. 3, 4). In essence, our primary duty as Christian citizens is to subject ourselves (vv. 1, 5) to these God-given 'governing authorities', so that society can function well. We pay our taxes, even if we don't agree with everything the government does.

We show respect to officials, even when we think they're wrong, out of respect for their office (v. 7). Ultimately, if governments or officials go badly wrong, other Scriptures speak about how to oppose, resist, or patiently endure them, like the examples of Daniel, Jesus himself, or his apostles.

APPLY Pray for those who have been affected as a consequence of sin: victims and their spouses, families, and children.

PRAY Father, please give me wisdom as I pray for the elected officials and employees in my country, both at the local and federal levels. Help me support and respond to them in ways that please you and bring you glory.

*Deut 32:4.

ACTION TIME

PRAY God the Creator, who changes times and seasons, thank you for including me in your salvation history.

READ **ROMANS 13:8-14**

REFLECT 'Know yourself,' said an ancient oracle. Ask the Lord to show you yourself as well as your Savior.

'Wake up!' The words may mean we have lost concentration, or that it is time to rise and get dressed at the beginning of the day. There is an urgency in Paul's words (vv. 11, 12). He is reminding the Christians in Rome that a new day has dawned with the resurrection of Jesus, and the present old era will pass away without further notice. The trouble is that we believers can blithely carry on as if in a daze, oblivious that our behavior still reflects the dark old times. 'Change now!' is the message. We need a change of clothes into a new behavior that reflects Jesus Christ (v. 14).

So some old behavior needs to be thrown away: in fact, all of the ugly items in verse 13. They are quite out of place in Christ's new world. Then we need to equip ourselves with some new behavior—in summary, love for other people. For example, we must choose to respect people's lives and property so that we do not steal or kill. We must choose self-control in sexual matters so that we do not commit adultery. We must choose contentment so that we do not covet what belongs to another (v. 9). This is the love required (v. 10). This is the love Jesus taught (Matthew 19:18, 19).

APPLY Do you have a pattern of behavior that needs changing? Can you think of a strategy for achieving it?

PRAY Jesus, please help me to conform my attitudes, affections, and actions to those that please you. Help me to love with the kind of love that you spoke of and expressed in Scripture.

DIFFERENT OPINIONS

PRAY God, give me a heart to love the riches of your wisdom and knowledge. Open my mind and make me aware of your unsearchable judgments and paths.*

READ **ROMANS 14:1-12**

REFLECT What do you think is appropriate attire for going to church? Have you changed your opinion over the years? Why?

It was over 50 years ago, and it seems silly now. I was in a hot, crowded, stuffy church on a sultry Sunday evening. Most men had taken their jackets off (yes, the men were wearing jackets then!) to feel more comfortable. I took my jacket off, but I still felt distinctly uncomfortable.

Somehow, I felt I was being disrespectful to God, to the church, and to the Lord's Day, worshipping there in my shirtsleeves. So I put my jacket back on and felt at ease again. My friends smiled indulgently at me. (Nowadays, my conscience does not object if I worship dressed more casually.)

How do we react to Christian people whose conscience is more sensitive than others', especially about something we think of as | minor? In Paul's day, perhaps some believers could not bring themselves to eat meat that had passed through pagan temple processes. Or possibly opinions varied about whether observing certain days, e.g., for prayer or fasting (vv. 2, 5), was helpful or unhelpful.

Don't think worse of a believer whose conscience is different from yours, says Paul (vv. 3, 10). Instead, show them respect for wanting the best (v. 6). The Lord knows their heart. We must not get above ourselves. Who are we to set ourselves up as judges of someone else's conscience? They and we are all answerable to God (vv. 11, 12).

APPLY Might you have some attitudes toward your Christian brothers and sisters that are judgmental and need to be confessed and changed?

PRAY Jesus, where beliefs or actions within my Christian community differ from mine, give me wisdom to respond in ways that express love and build unity.

*Rom 11:33.



CITY VIEW

PRAY 'I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry ... I desire to do your will, my God; your law is within my heart.*'

READ **PSALM 48**

REFLECT Like the prodigal son with his father (Luke 15:18-21), let us humble ourselves before our Father in heaven.

There are many towns and cities in Europe with ancient walls still standing, testifying to the town's defenses centuries ago. Tourists and locals can walk along the walls and enjoy a fine panorama of the town while absorbing its history.

Jerusalem was similar. People rejoiced to 'walk about Zion' (v. 12). Its impressive defenses reminded them of the city's past deliverances. They saw the city's incredible beauty and, more importantly, recalled its Great King, who had graciously saved them (vv. 1, 2). From the walls, they could see where, relatively recently, vast Assyrian forces had besieged the city but had then been thoroughly vanquished (vv. 4-7). The people had heard about the Lord's saving power; now they looked at it, in this very place (v. 8). The beauty and security of Jerusalem's architecture strengthened everyone's faith in God's power and continuing love (vv. 9-11).

We can all view Jerusalem in our imagination: see its impressive walls, the towers, the temple, and then the cross, the empty tomb, and the Pentecost crowd. We, too, can meditate on this city of the Great King, who will be our God forever, alongside us to the end (vv. 2, 14).

APPLY In pictures, or with your mind's eye, take some time to look at the city of Jerusalem and marvel at God's centuries-long provision and protection. Then rejoice over the heavenly city, where believers in Christ will enjoy God's presence forever.

PRAY Father, I pray for peace and security for all people living in present-day Jerusalem. I also ask that your Spirit move in mighty ways, drawing many to faith in Christ.

*Ps 115:1.

MOUNTAINS AND MOLEHILLS

PRAY Lord, please still me with your presence. Help me to hear your voice as I reflect on Scripture today.

READ **ROMANS 14:13–23**

REFLECT Seeing things in their right perspective can sometimes be difficult in Christian circles. Big things can get ignored, and small things can become huge.

In Rome, it may have been the case (though we are not told the details) that some Jewish Christians were still only comfortable eating meat according to the strict Jewish way, and they found it deeply upsetting to their faith that gentile followers of their Messiah would eat any meat cooked anyway. Was this a big matter? Yes, to those Jews! But to those gentiles? No, they carried on regardless.

Paul's view on it (and God's) is different. Something we regard as minor becomes a major thing if it builds up or trips up someone else's faith (vv. 13, 15). Our molehill can be another person's mountain. What we eat and drink in themselves are clearly not as important as doing right and pursuing peace (v. 17). Yet if our choices in these mundane matters affect the exercise of someone's faith and conscience, they can become very significant.

Avoiding, say, a meal once associated with paganism, or a glass of alcohol, because of someone else's weakness or sensibility, may be very constructive and supportive (vv. 19, 21). Things that build up another's faith and encourage unity are big.

APPLY How well do you know your conscience? Is it sensitive enough? Or too sensitive? Do you listen to it? Thank God for it.

PRAY As I follow my conscience in my walk with you, Jesus, help me to strive for unity always as I relate to my fellow Christians whose walks with you may appear different from mine.

GIVE WAY!

PRAY Thank you for your Word, Father, and for the love, hope, and rest you offer me through it.

READ **ROMANS 15:1-6**

REFLECT Jesus gave us a living, breathing example of how God calls us to live.

‘Give way!’ says the road sign, as the traffic lanes merge. Are you the sort of person who tends to give way when there’s conflict, or do you dig in your heels? The truth is, of course, that sometimes we need to stand firm, and sometimes we need to give way or negotiate. Love ‘is not self-seeking,’ says the apostle elsewhere (1 Corinthians 13:5). Paul is saying here we need to develop an ability to give way to others (‘not to please ourselves’, v. 1).

The supreme example is so obvious we might miss it—the Lord Jesus himself. His whole ministry and sacrifice could be summed up as not pleasing himself. The Old Testament reinforces this, highlighting for us how he willingly suffered in his Father’s service (v. 3). All of this is very practical. The Scriptures, as always, encourage us to endure (v. 4). Jesus’ example inspires us to live for the good of others, not just for our own pleasure (v. 2). In the church fellowship, there are bound to be some tensions and differences of opinion. But if everyone shows the same generosity of spirit toward each other that Jesus showed, then our worship and fellowship will glorify God so much more (vv. 5, 6).

APPLY ‘The fruit of the Spirit is...forbearance’ (Galatians 5:22). How true is this in your life and experience?

PRAY Lord Jesus, mold me today as a potter molds their clay. Help me to be more like you in all I think and do.

FOR THE MANY NOT THE FEW

PRAY Heavenly Father, help me to put your words into practice and delight in doing your will.

READ **ROMANS 15:7-13**

REFLECT Step outside of your own life and fellowship for a few minutes to hear the Lord speak to you from his worldwide vantage point.

If you're writing a long email, you might want to mention your main points again at the end. As Paul begins to conclude this major letter to the Romans, he underscores the good news that the gospel is for everyone everywhere. He stresses it four times.

1. Christ became a servant for Jew and gentile alike (vv. 8, 9). 2. In Christ, God fulfills his promises to the Jews in such a way that non-Jews (gentiles) also can praise God for his mercy (vv. 8-11). 3. From the beginning, God intended the Jews to be his instrument through whom the whole world might come to praise and glorify God (v. 12). 4. The exalted Christ reigns in righteousness over all the nations of the world. Because of this, all people can have hope (v. 12).

The practical implications for us are, first, to accept one another, as Christ accepted us (v. 7). How terrible if we should shun someone for whom Christ died. Secondly, be filled with hope! Think about verse 13. We could learn it by heart. Trust the God of hope. He has worked throughout the centuries to bring us joy and peace in Christ, whoever we are, by the power of his Spirit (v. 13).

APPLY Think of all the various ways Christians in different countries praise God and bring glory to him.

PRAY Thank you, Lord God, for the worldwide spread of the gospel. With thanksgiving, I lift up to you those who are sharing the gospel in the hard places of the world; give them vision and courage.

GOSPEL IMPERATIVES

PRAY O Lord, make me worthy of your calling. By your power, bring to fruition my every desire for goodness and my every deed prompted by faith.*

READ **ROMANS 15:14–22**

REFLECT Be curious; look for something in the Bible that is new, unexpected, or forgotten, and receive it gladly.

Paul was more sensitive and more considerate than he is often given credit for. Was he worried here that he might not have gotten the tone quite right for his audience? He wholeheartedly reassured them of his high opinion of them (vv. 14, 15), and he offered a further explanation (following 1:10–13) for why he had not yet visited them (v. 22).

The main reason behind everything Paul did was that God had given him this huge privilege of ‘ministering Jesus Christ’ to the non-Jewish world (vv. 15, 16). Three times Paul mentions ‘proclaiming the gospel’ (vv. 16, 19, 20). This was his overarching joy, duty, and ambition. Hence, his delay in visiting Rome. He had been busy! He felt he was primarily a pioneer and therefore should prioritize places where the gospel had not yet reached (v. 20).

When I was 21, someone much older implored me, ‘When you are a vicar in a new parish, please remember that God was at work there before you.’ A strong sense of call to God’s work doesn’t mean we can ignore God’s people around us. See how Paul, the great apostle to the unreached, still affirmed the brave Christians in Rome; he still took trouble to explain his plans to them (v. 22), and he took care not to muscle in on someone else’s ministry (v. 20).

APPLY Where might you need wisdom to know when to resist other people’s expectations and when to accept other people’s advice and insight?

PRAY Lord, help me to be faithful in carrying out your plans for me, and to know that what you have called me to do, you will help me to accomplish.

*2 Thess 1:11.

PEOPLE PRAY

PRAY Lord, make your Word my rule, your Holy Spirit my teacher. Help me be a good learner today.

READ **ROMANS 15:23-33**

REFLECT Read in John 17, how much of Jesus' Gethsemane prayer is intercessory.

Life was never easy for Paul, and he might have been worried about road safety. Bandits were common. He was uninsured, on a long journey, and carrying a large amount of cash collected from the churches of Macedonia and Greece to relieve poverty in their 'mother' church in Jerusalem. Was he carrying large bags of gold coins? Sea travel was hazardous too. Paul was shipwrecked four times.

Also, if he arrived in Jerusalem safely, he faced an uncertain reception. Jewish opponents might block him or even try to kill him (as did in fact happen, Acts 23:12-22). Jewish Christians might not accept a gift from gentile Christians (v. 31), or they might not see the importance of believers from different cultures helping one another in a united church (v. 17). Moreover, Paul was determined, under God, to go to Spain (another long journey!). Yet he longed to visit the church at Rome for fellowship and support (vv. 23, 24, 28, 32).

So, please pray! he urged (v. 30). Even if we are trying to do God's will and are mindful of God's good providence, we still need the prayers of the Christian family, and they need ours.

APPLY When God brings someone to your mind or attention, consider that it is his prompt for you to pray for them.

PRAY Lord, thank you for intercessory prayer—yours for me and for the privilege we have in the church to pray for each other.

MEMORY VERSES FOR THE MONTH

WEEK 1: To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

- **Romans 16:27**

WEEK 2: I know every bird in the mountains, and the insects in the fields are mine.

- **Psalms 50:11**

WEEK 3: Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

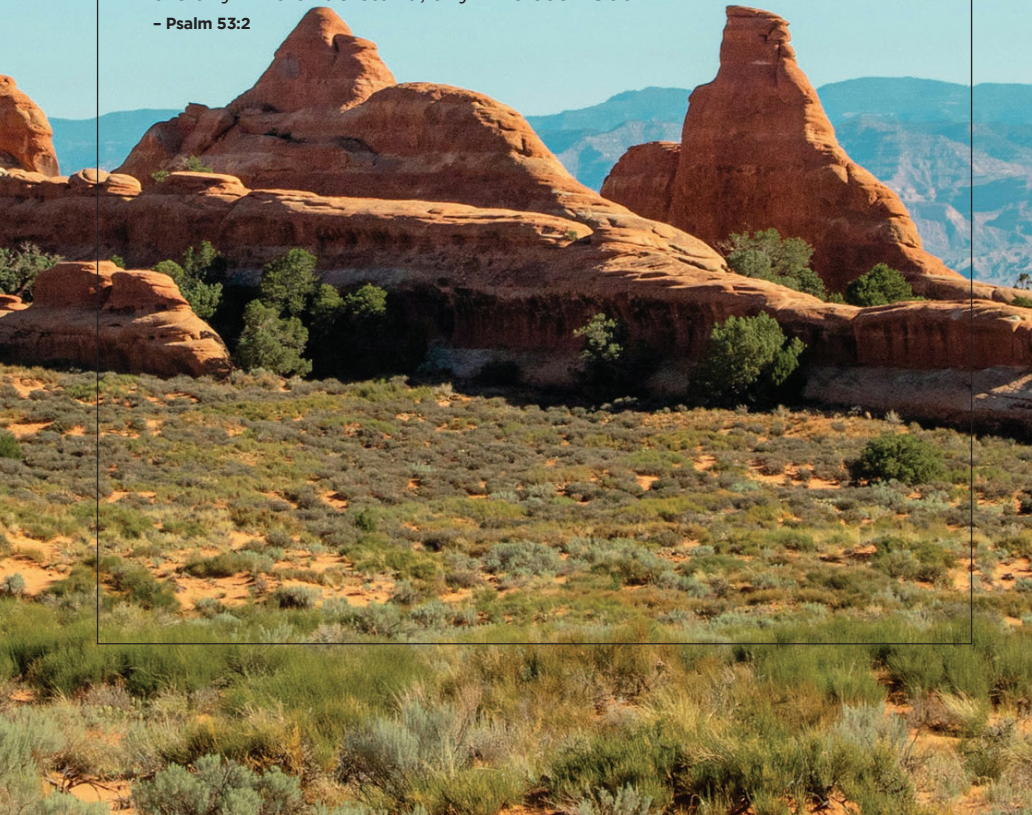
- **Psalms 51:10, 12**

WEEK 4: My only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.

- **Acts 20:24b**

WEEK 5: God looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.

- **Psalms 53:2**



NOT JUST MEET, BUT GREET

PRAY Lord Almighty, who is the Maker of heaven and earth, I lift up my eyes to you, from whom my help comes.*

READ **ROMANS 16:1-16**

REFLECT How valued do you feel by your brothers and sisters in Christ?

Imagine you are gathering in a house in Rome for fellowship and worship. A certain Phoebe (v. 1) has brought this letter from Corinth from the apostle Paul, addressed to the group. Then imagine that, as it is read out for the first time, you are one of the believers Paul identifies by name as 'my dear friend' (v. 8), or 'a hard worker in the Lord' (v. 12), or 'faithful to Christ' (v. 10). You'd feel ten feet tall! Which of the 26 believers mentioned here can you identify with most? The heroic (vv. 3, 4), the house church member (vv. 5, 14, 15), the tested and persecuted (vv. 7, 10), or the caring and dependable (v. 13b)?

Notice Paul's kindness. He greets people personally, by name. Many are women, most of whom he singles out as deserving recognition. Some are Jews, many are gentiles; some are longstanding believers, some have typical slave names; and Paul greets them all with affection. He knows the value of these short comments of appreciation and encouragement. In addition, Paul asks if anyone can help Phoebe practically while she is in Rome. He hopes so. She has been a generous helper to Paul and many others back home. Christians help people, of course. Supporting someone who has helped others is doubly appropriate (v. 2).

APPLY Who are those you can acknowledge and encourage today by name?

PRAY Jesus, thank you for the many examples of Paul's character I see in the New Testament. As I see them, challenge me to make those characteristics a part of who I am and how I love others.

*Ps 121:1.



GOD, DEATH, AND WEALTH

PRAY Lord God, prompt me to hunger and thirst for righteousness so that I may be filled. Keep my heart pure so that I may see you.*

READ **PSALM 49**

REFLECT ‘Hear’ and ‘listen’ to gain ‘wisdom’ and ‘understanding’, says today’s psalm (vv. 1–3). Pray that you may do just that.

Money can buy many good things in life. Multimillionaires can buy themselves a tourist ride in space if they wish. Many wealthy (and not-so-wealthy) people give generously to good causes. Some on the ‘rich list’ even pledge to give away their vast fortune during their lifetime.

Money has its limitations, too, as all the world can see (vv. 1, 2). ‘You can’t take it with you’ (v. 17). In the end, everyone, without exception, leaves their money behind (v. 10). Beyond the grave, it has no leverage or purchasing power. It cannot buy us a ticket out of death (vv. 8, 9). In life, money can fund houses and great estates, but the best accommodation it can manage in death is a tomb (v. 11)! Yet some still live for their wealth, and in some hands it means oppression and misery for others (vv. 5, 6).

But what money can’t do, God can. ‘God will redeem me from ... the dead’, says our psalmist (v. 15). Death is a cash-free zone. But, as the New Testament insists, we are redeemed from futility not with silver and gold but with the precious blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:18, 19). Our money will not welcome us into glory, but our Redeemer will (v. 15).

APPLY Money and death affect us all. Pray for help and support for those with money issues and for those attending the funeral of a loved one at this time.

PRAY Lord Jesus, wherever you have placed me on the financial spectrum, help me to have a right view of my money, always mindful of its right place, both in life and death.

*Matt 5:6, 8.

PRACTICAL AND SUBLIME

PRAY Thank you, Father, for your Word. Help me to hear what your Spirit says to me through it, to glean new insights that enable me to serve you better.

READ **ROMANS 16:17-27**

REFLECT Are you as sensitive to the Word of God as you are to the words of your friends?

Watch out for scammers, we are told. Such people phone or email us, and they sound genuine, but they're not. It's all very convincing. They pressure us to do what they say. But it's a scam. They are trying to steal our money. We need to be alert.

'Watch out' is Paul's final practical message. Watch out for those who are divisive and obstructive in the fellowship. They may be able to talk convincingly, but they deceive those who are easily swayed. Steer clear of them. By contrast, Paul is glad about his Roman friends. They are well-practiced in following good teaching and have little experience of evil. Paul wants them to keep it that way (vv. 17-19).

Paul makes room for sending greetings to Rome from the believers who are gathered around him in Corinth (vv. 21-23) before his momentous journey to Jerusalem (Acts 20-26). The end of the letter (vv. 25, 26) echoes the beginning (1:1-5), reminding us of our debt to Paul for the sublime truths that he labored to bring us—the good news of Jesus Christ, the eternal purposes of God, the revelation of the Scriptures, and the obedience of faith for all peoples. May we be immovable, firmly 'established' (v. 25) on these truths.

APPLY What are your safeguards against those who would offer faulty teaching or cause divisions in your Christian community?

PRAY Father, thank you for Paul, whose ministry you used to instruct the early church and still use to teach me. Help me to be sensitive to those things I need to better apply in my walk of faith.

PRESENCE AND PROMISE

For the next two weeks, we will be joining Jacob as he runs from his brother, Esau, and later returns. It's not always easy to like Jacob. In earlier readings, we have seen how he first stole Esau's birthright and then his blessing. He is devious, deceptive, and manipulative—qualities which we shall see repeated as he spends years with his uncle Laban, marries, has children, and then finally returns to face Esau.

It is not all bad; he worships God, trusts God (sometimes), and acknowledges God's place in his life. Despite his flawed character and inconsistent behavior, God meets with him again and again, in his grace, ever-present. Jacob remains within God's promise and purpose to bless all nations through Abraham's descendants (Genesis 12:1–3).

We who fail frequently can be encouraged. God does not give up on us. His promise to us is different from the promise to Jacob, and we live in a very different world. But he has assured us that he will never leave us (Hebrews 13:5). That does not give us permission to behave as we like, but it does reassure us that when we fail and return, we will be received. God is still working out his ultimate purpose to restore all things through Jesus. As you read, look for places where you see God at work today, in your life, in your church, and in the wider world.

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GOD NEVER LETS GO

PRAY Thank you, Jesus, for your death, resurrection, and now your intercession for me at the right hand of God.*

READ **GENESIS 28:10-22**

REFLECT Sit quietly and expectantly, looking for God to come and meet with you. Sense his presence, awesome and mysterious, gracious and loving.

Jacob is heading for Haran for two reasons: first, Esau is seeking revenge for his stolen inheritance and blessing; and second, his mother Rebekah has ensured that Isaac, his father, sends him off with a blessing to find a wife among her own people. So this is not a happy journey. His life may not be falling apart, but it is fraught. Then God steps into the picture and reminds him of his promise to Abraham, a promise which now involves Jacob. Note how similar the language is to Genesis 13, verses 14 and 15. Jacob responds with awe, worship, and obedience.

When we have questions, doubts, and fears, when life is not working out as hoped, we may need to remind ourselves of God's presence and promise.

It is not that God has left us, even though it may feel that way. He has not forgotten his promise. Sometimes we will have powerful experiences of God being with us, sometimes a quiet assurance, and sometimes we have to hold on to his promise. He will faithfully ensure that the plans he has for us will come to completion. We can journey on confidently, despite the pressures and the fears.

APPLY Might God have you on a journey now? In what ways are you experiencing his presence?

PRAY Father, thank you that I do not need to see the end for the beginning, if you are leading me. Help me to face every challenge with confidence, not in myself, but in your presence and power to save.

*Rom 8:34.

GOD IN THE EVERYDAY

PRAY Great is your faithfulness, Lord. Your great love and compassions are new every morning.*

READ **GENESIS 29:1-14a**

REFLECT Open your heart and mind to the God who meets us in the everyday. Prepare to meet him in the ordinariness of today.

Sometimes we have great spiritual experiences—it may be at a large celebration, in our regular Bible reading, in a conversation with a friend, or as we reflect on the wonders of creation. But most of life is not like that. It is more ordinary, and sometimes it is hard to see where God is or what he is doing. Jacob would have identified with that. Yesterday, we read about Jacob's extraordinary and powerful meeting with God. Today, he is back in the world of long journeys and meetings. His Bethel moment is replaced by a getting-water-for-sheep moment, the spectacular by the mundane. But this meeting with Rachel is a key part of the narrative that moves God's story forward. While it may not be that evident that God is still leading him, his presence is just as real, if not as spectacular.

So it is with us. God is with us in everyday encounters in the workplace, at the school gates, on social media, and in the coffee shop. For Jacob, what appear to be chance encounters are part of God's plan to fulfill his promise to Abraham. For us, apparent chance encounters may be God-appointed moments to show and share his love.

APPLY Look for something extraordinary in your day that God does when you are least expecting it.

PRAY Lord, help me to see the extraordinary in the midst of the ordinary, for you are always present, always at work, always carrying out your plans.

*Lam 3:22, 23.

UNEXPECTED BRIDE

PRAY Father, thank you for your grace and mercy and for the unconditional love and acceptance that are mine in Christ.

READ **GENESIS 29:14b-30**

REFLECT ‘The church embodies the power of the resurrection in the midst of a not-yet-redeemed world.’*

This messy story of deceit, sexual desire, exploitation, and betrayal does not make for easy reading. The idea of women being used as bargaining pieces is deeply disturbing. Jacob’s virtual slavery makes us uncomfortable. But despite significant cultural differences, this is a world we know. Misogyny and objectification of women are still with us. Slavery can still be found in various forms. Most of us will have experienced exploitation or betrayal in some form or another.

This incident reminds us that life in a broken world populated by fallen human beings will always be messy. But this was never God’s intention. He created men and women to be companions, sharing together in caring for his creation. Jesus and Paul give women new dignity and status. In the new community of God’s people, there is neither slave nor free (Galatians 3:28), preparing the way for the eventual abolition of slavery, admittedly not yet fully achieved. In contrast to a world of lies and manipulation, Jesus models truth and integrity.

APPLY Above all, through the mess of today’s reading, God is working out his promise to Abraham and remains faithfully active in the confusion of our individual lives and the brokenness of our world.

PRAY Pray for missionaries, especially those in cultures where things like polygamy and slavery still exist, that God will give them wisdom in addressing these issues when there are conversions to Christ.

PRAY

*Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (Harper One, 1996).

HAPPY FAMILIES?

PRAY Thank you, Father, for your great love for me that offers me compassion that never fails; it is new every morning. I praise you for your faithfulness.*

READ **GENESIS 29:31-30:24**

REFLECT Take the psalmist's words to heart: 'I have calmed and quietened myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother' (Psalm 131:2).

This could so easily be the plot of a twenty-first-century soap opera. Leah lives with the pain of being unloved, Rachel with the pain of childlessness. Jacob enjoys sexual activity without offering genuine affection. He shows little understanding of Rachel's or Leah's pain. And we can only guess at the feelings of Bilhah and Zilpah. This is dysfunctional family life at its worst.

But it is not beyond redemption. The beautiful words 'God remembered Rachel' do not mean that he had forgotten her. They mean that at this point in the story, God chose to intervene and show grace to Rachel. Why then, and not earlier, we cannot know: there are things we do not understand about how God works, and sometimes we have to trust without knowing all the answers. The names of all these sons are familiar to us as the tribes of later Israel. We begin to see that the promise to Abraham is for the long term. The mention of Judah brings to mind one who will be known as the 'Lion of the tribe of Judah' (Revelation 5:5). We can rejoice that, out of the pain and difficulty that we see here, Jesus will come to deal with the sin, deceit, and failure of humanity, to stand with the lonely, the hurting, and the marginalized.

APPLY Think of someone you know who is wondering what God is doing. In what ways can you help them to trust that God will 'remember' them?

PRAY Lord, when I struggle, waiting for you to 'remember' me, help me to remember that in you, there is always redemption.

*Lam 3:22, 23.

CONSEQUENCES

PRAY As I read your Word today, Father, still my spirit and enable me to draw truth from it that challenges and transforms me.

READ **GENESIS 31:1-21**

REFLECT Have there been times when you've suffered the consequences of someone else's decisions?

Laban is still in the business of deception and manipulation—for some background to these verses, read Chapter 30, verses 25–43. With our modern understanding of genetics, these breeding arrangements don't make sense, but God is overruling and frustrating Laban's schemes and enabling Jacob to prosper. Jacob has the wisdom to recognize this. To believe that we have achieved things in our own strength or through our own ability is a dangerous mistake (Deuteronomy 8:17, 18).

Jacob knows that his wealth comes from God and that God is working in his life, but he does not act as if that were true. He has already spoken of his desire to go home (Genesis 30:25) and now, having heard God's instruction, he obeys, but in deceptive ways that will lead to further problems. We, too, can be tempted to take things into our own hands. The better way is to remember God's past faithfulness and trust him for the future. That does not mean doing nothing; it does mean listening to God and acting in line with what he says.

Rachel and Leah clearly resent the way they have been treated. Laban, through his selfishness, is about to lose his daughters and grandchildren, a direct consequence of his actions. Little we do is done in isolation; there are always consequences.

APPLY Might there be places where you need to be more open to God's voice and respond in obedience to him?

PRAY Father, help me to always be ready to listen to your voice, always ready to obey whatever you call me to do.



TRUE WORSHIP

PRAY Lord God, accept my praise and worship today, for you are worth far more than anything I can offer you.

READ **PSALM 50**

REFLECT Today, join the psalmist and prepare to ‘Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness...’ (Psalm 96:9).

Today, we join with others in worship. It will take different forms. At its best, it will be focused on God’s character, his saving activity, and his purposes in the world. But sometimes it will reflect more of our preferences and desires and be aimed at pleasing ourselves rather than God. This psalm addresses just such issues.

In verses 1-5, God summons his people to the place of judgment. The picture is of a glorious and powerful God, somewhat reminiscent of his appearance at Sinai. Then, in verses 6-15, God tells them that while there is nothing inherently wrong with their sacrifices, it is their motivation that matters. He does not need their sacrifices, for anything they can offer is already his, but delights in their worship—and ours—if it expresses gratitude (v. 14) and dependence (v. 15). Worship that, like that of the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable (Luke 18:9-14), is more about how well we are doing than about God, is not acceptable. Verses 16-23 are darker and address the hypocrisy of worship offered to God by those whose lives do not honor him—a reminder that worship is not just about what we do in church on Sunday, but also about how we live during the rest of the week.

APPLY Where might your attitudes and actions, Monday through Saturday, need to be more consistent with how you act in church on Sunday?

PRAY Teach me, my God and King, / In all things Thee to see, / and what I do in anything / To do it as for Thee.*

*George Herbert, ‘The Elixir’, 1593-1633.

RELIGIOUS SMORGASBORD

PRAY Prince of Glory, thank you for suffering the cross and rising from the dead so that I can have life eternal as a part of your kingdom.

READ **GENESIS 31:22-42**

REFLECT ‘If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.’*

No one comes out of this well. There is anger, resentment, deception (again!), fear, self-justification, and suspicion. Jacob no doubt felt that leaving secretly was the only option, and with good reason, given Laban’s track record—even here, his words about giving them a good send-off ring hollow. Laban does not share Jacob’s relationship with God; he talks about the God of your father and seems more concerned about the loss of his household gods than anything else, but at least he hears from God and obeys. Rachel stole from her father. Was she stealing the household gods to ensure good fortune or to spite her father? Jacob shows faith—but only sometimes and only in part.

We know the feeling. We can get it right, but we can also get it wrong. Sometimes our faith is strong; at other times we fail to trust, we go our own way, or we put our trust in the wrong things—not small, man-made statues, but wealth, health, career, relationships... And in a world of many pressures, there is always the danger of compromise. Like Rachel, we can absorb the values of the surrounding culture in subtle and unnoticed ways.

But we have resources that were not available to Jacob—the example of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit living in us.

APPLY Are there situations where you might be in danger of living by the values of your peers rather than the values of Jesus?

PRAY Holy Spirit, please continue to show me how Jesus lived and build in me a growing desire to follow him in all that I do.

*Gal 1:10b.

PEACE TREATY

PRAY In your presence, Jesus, there is peace. Thank you for your promise to be with me always.

READ **GENESIS 31:43-55**

REFLECT Recognize that God is an everpresent reality in your life. Sit quietly and allow yourself to become aware of his presence with you now.

How do we settle our differences, especially when there is suspicion and mistrust? Perhaps we don't bother and just let things drift on. Jacob and Laban were determined to have clarity. So they made a covenant, a binding agreement. Today, we might have lawyers draft a document that sets terms and ensures there are no misunderstandings. Their equivalent was a pillar and a heap of stones, acting as a permanent reminder and making the boundaries very clear. Then they had a meal, because that is how, in their world, agreements were ratified (v. 54). If there are things you need to resolve with others, why not make a plan to do it?

God was the ultimate witness (v. 42) who saw all that they did (v. 49). God was the final judge who would hold both parties to account (v. 53). There is a sacrifice acknowledging that everything had taken place in the presence of God (v. 54). No doubt there were times when Jacob wondered what God was doing, but he never completely lost sight of God, who had been ever-present, leading, directing, sustaining, protecting, and providing. This is no less true for us. How far are we aware of it?

APPLY Is your trust in God expressed in ways that others will see and take note?

PRAY Throughout this week, Lord, help me to know that you are with me in every situation. Make me a living witness for your faithfulness to others around me.

TRUST THE PROMISE

PRAY Father, thank you for your Spirit, without whom I could not know you or know how to live my life in ways that please you.

READ **GENESIS 32:1-21**

REFLECT Identify some areas of your life in which you want to see God work. Look for his reassurance today.

Laban returns home, and Jacob is left to continue his journey, uncertain and afraid of meeting Esau. If he ever needed reassurance, it is now. And God provides it in the form of a meeting with angels. But this does not completely remove his fear. And so he turns to God with a memorable prayer.

He acknowledges his own weakness. He recognizes all that God has done for him. He reminds God of his promises. He prays for protection. There is much that we could learn about prayer from his example. Our prayers are first and foremost to be based on the character and promise of God. They are to be grounded in our relationship with him. They will acknowledge that we are dependent on him. If you have a few moments, check these points against the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13.

Jacob doesn't seem to have complete confidence in God. Fear can make us behave in strange ways and undermine trust. Jacob continues his elaborate plan to pacify Esau with gifts and to protect at least part of his wealth and family by dividing them into two groups (v. 7). There's nothing wrong with making plans—unless they reveal a lack of trust in God.

APPLY Where do you need more faith? Talk to God about it now.

PRAY Holy Spirit, when things seem impossible to overcome and my faith wavers, help me overcome my unbelief.

NEW NAME, NEW CALLING

PRAY I come to you today, Lord Jesus, with gratitude and in humble adoration. There is no love, no power, no grace nor mercy greater than that which you offer me.

READ **GENESIS 32:22-32**

REFLECT In what ways has God made his presence known to you?

If you are anything like me, you will find this a strange or even disturbing incident. It's not easy to make sense of the details, and we wonder what is going on and why it takes place. God initiates the contact/contest because he has new things to teach Jacob. These unexpected meetings with God form a pattern in the life of Jacob. Sometimes God meets us when we least expect it and in surprising ways. God is not predictable and does not operate in ways that we can understand. But all he does, however strange it may seem, is done for our ultimate benefit.

Names are significant in the ancient world and carry significance and power. Abram becomes Abraham (often interpreted as 'father of many nations'; Genesis 17:1-8), and Jacob is now renamed Israel. The name change and the blessing are marks of God's call. The change of name sets the tone for the future of God's people. Something significant has happened, and Jacob's life will never be quite the same again.

When God calls us to some particular task, he is unlikely to change our names, but he will give us his blessing and the resources that we need. Like Jacob, we may find that life takes on a new dimension.

APPLY Is there a promise God had made, or a task he has called you to, for which you find it difficult to trust him?

PRAY Thank you, Jesus, that because you love me, my name is indelibly written in heaven.

FAITH SEES BEYOND

PRAY Father in heaven, fill my heart with love for you, my mind with thoughts of you, and align my will to yours so that I can bring you glory as I serve you with all that I am.

READ **GENESIS 33**

REFLECT Name anything that might distract you. Ask God to help you gather your scattered thoughts and focus on him.

Life can be confusing. Sometimes it is hard to make sense of things and decide on the best course of action. Take comfort from Jacob. On the one hand, he is still suspicious, possibly with good reason, devious, deceptive, and perhaps self-serving. On the other hand, he feels guilty, wants to reconcile with Esau, and is prepared to make reparation for his earlier behavior, although it looks a little like a bribe. He acknowledges that God has provided for him (v. 5).

God remains at the center of his life. The exact meaning of 'El Elohe Israel' (v. 20) is uncertain, but it firmly links Jacob/Israel with God. His use of his new name highlights his acceptance of his new calling and relationship with God. His building of an altar indicates to us that, although Jacob only owns a small portion of the land, he has faith for more. It reminds us of Abraham, who traveled through the land, promised but not yet owned, erecting altars as a mark of faith (12:7, 8; 13:4, 18). Both men are mentioned in Hebrews 11 as examples of faith. Against the odds, they believed God would keep his promise and come through. Having faith and being in God's plan does not require perfection. And that gives us hope.

APPLY In what tangible ways do you express your faith in what God is able to do?

PRAY Lord Jesus, help me to stand firm on your promises. Help me make my life a testimony to your love and faithfulness in keeping your promises.

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

PRAY Father, as I read and meditate on your Word today, use it to speak not only to my intellect, but to my heart. Please draw me closer to you.

READ **GENESIS 35:1-15**

REFLECT Recall your first experience of God. Let that memory prepare you to meet with him in new ways today.

We can be slow to learn. Lessons have to be repeated. God takes Jacob back to where it all started. Sometimes going back is the best way forward. If we lose sight of God, we can remind ourselves of the time God first met with us and let that strengthen our faith. When doubts and questions arise, we can go back to the cross of Jesus and remember his love.

Going back gives us an opportunity to refocus our priorities. It will help us to get rid of anything that might pull us away. Far from providing protection, the household gods have proved a hindrance. It's good to review from time to time and get rid of anything that is hindering or damaging our relationship with God.

Once Jacob has refocused, he is in a better position to hear God refresh his promise and renew his call with a further reminder of his new name. God has great things for him. They are not dependent on Jacob—although he has to play his part of worship and obedience—but on the faithfulness and the long-term plan of God. Today, we, the church of Jesus Christ, have a role to play in God's faithful plan for his world.

APPLY What might you need to put aside in order to give God his rightful place in your life?

PRAY Jesus, let nothing come between us as I follow you; let nothing or no one hold my affections before you.



FORGIVEN PRAISE

PRAY As I engage with this psalm today, Father, I pray that you will speak to me in fresh and powerful ways.

READ **PSALM 51**

REFLECT 'Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, / evermore his praises sing?'

David knows he has messed up. Probably not surprising, as a prophet has told him a story about a rich man robbing a poor man of his lamb, and when David becomes angry at the rich man's behavior, he hits him with, 'You are the man!' (2 Samuel 12:7). Harder for us in a world of compromised standards, where knowing right and wrong can be difficult, and where we can be subtly affected by the worldview and moral standards of those around us. It's worth making a regular practice of asking God to show you where you have gone wrong, and perhaps find a 'prophet', a trusted friend to whom you can be accountable.

Overwhelmed by the enormity of his failure, David turns to God, confesses his sin, and pleads for forgiveness and restoration (vv. 7-12). He knows he deserves nothing, but that God is gracious—something which we can see even more clearly as a result of Jesus' death. This is where we often leave this psalm, but there is more. David promises, once forgiven and restored, to praise God (v. 14) and tell others how good God is (vv. 13, 15). That's an important part of his story and of ours.

Forgiveness is not just for our personal benefit, something to keep to ourselves; it is good news to tell others.

APPLY Think about the way that God has forgiven you and praise him. Who could you tell about it this week?

PRAY Lord Jesus, help me to express my gratitude for all you have done in ways that draw others to you.

*'Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven', Henry Francis Lyte, 1843.

BLESSING FOR THE NATIONS

PRAY Father, please give me a greater understanding of your Word and the ability to put into practice what your Spirit teaches me.

READ **GENESIS 35:16–29**

REFLECT In what ways do you see yourself as a blessing?

Here's a glimpse into the future. We have seen these names before and have noted that they will become familiar as the tribes of Israel who will later enter the Promised Land and from whom will come the Savior, not just for Israel but for the whole world. (It's worth noting that when the land is divided, Levi, having become the priestly tribe, has no land allotted, while Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh both receive land.) The promise to Abraham, renewed to Jacob, is fulfilled in the people of Israel but receives its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus (Galatians 3:16), through whose death and resurrection the whole world is blessed.

There is pain. Rachel, the beloved wife, dies. Benjamin had a special place in his father's heart—Jacob too readily has favorites, an attitude that led to trouble (37:4). Reuben had sex with Bilhah—an action that will have far-reaching consequences (49:3, 4). Isaac dies, but his death leads to further reconciliation between Jacob and Esau (v. 28). The brokenness of the world is evident.

We are invited to see our place in God's ongoing plan for the world. Although separated from Jacob by hundreds of years, we stand in the same purpose of God—to redeem fallen humanity, restore a broken world, and form a new community of people who will bear witness to his deeds.

APPLY Even in our current broken world, where do you see evidence of God's redemption?

PRAY Thank you, Father, that in your Son there is redemption, not just for me, but for the whole world.

TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

Let's head into an adventure together. The Acts of the Apostles could be known as the Acts of the Holy Spirit—turning the world upside down. Or the right way up! As we read about the missionary journeys of Paul and his companions, we'll travel through Asia Minor, now modern-day Turkey, and discover how the good news of Jesus began to spread, giving rise to Turkey being called the 'Second Holy Land', the cradle of the young Christian church. Just before writing this, I was privileged to lead a pilgrimage to visit many of the places mentioned, and the Christian heritage is still visible, although many ancient churches are being turned into mosques. Turkey needs our prayers.

Paul was born in Tarsus, in modern-day Turkey. On these journeys we will be reading about, he traveled vast distances, presumably walking, as the Spirit led him on to the next place, the next adventure, the next preaching of the good news of Jesus. From Acts 13 on, it's really the Acts of Paul, directed and empowered by the Spirit, as he interacts with men and women, wealthy and poor, gentiles and Jews. Even more, it's the Acts of the Spirit, with energy and excitement, crises and persecution—a microcosm of the present-world church. How will it inspire our lives and ministry today?

You might like to find a map of Paul's journeys—either online or at the back of a Bible—to see exactly where we'll be.

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AN INFLUENCER

PRAY Thank you, Jesus, for the gift of each fellow believer who helps me to grow as your disciple.

READ **ACTS 16:11-15**

REFLECT Are you on social media? Do you follow any influencers or fashion designers?

Lydia was in Paul's world, trading in the most expensive purple cloth; a person of means, an entrepreneur, able to have her own household (vv. 14, 15) with room for hospitality. She was from Thyatira, an important center of the cloth trade, and had already become a worshipper of God.

Maybe Lydia was also an influencer. Paul later wrote a very personal letter to the Philippian church, full of joy, and a church grew in Thyatira too (Revelation 2:18). Did Lydia take the message home with her on a visit? We don't know for certain, but from this little group of women, the gospel undoubtedly spread.

Where do you interact with others? For instance, social media, work, school, the gym, traveling, commuting, or shopping? You may not be a social media influencer or an entrepreneur, but, like Lydia, we each have people and places in our lives where we can be an influencer in the power of the Holy Spirit. How might the Lord be calling you to be an influencer, talking about his good news to others?

APPLY Lydia devoted herself to the Lord (v. 15). Ask the Holy Spirit to help you be an influencer and to refresh your vision and calling as you devote yourself to the Lord and to his good news.

PRAY Thank you, Father, for those who have influenced me in my faith journey. Show me how I can have a gospel impact in the lives of those around me.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS!

PRAY I praise you, Jesus, for calling sinful people and transforming them by the grace of the gospel. Thank you for the ways you are changing me.

READ **ACTS 16:16-28**

REFLECT As you pray, hold out open hands to God, as a symbol of willingness for whatever he wants in your life.

Did you notice the brief sentence Paul uses to heal the young slave girl? 'In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!' (v. 18, italics mine). There's no laying hands on her or anointing with oil (not that there's anything wrong with those: James 5:14), nor a lengthy prayer. It's short, simple, sincere. And authoritative.

Two things stand out for me in these verses. First, Paul doesn't hesitate: he loudly prays a quick, commanding, healing prayer on the spot. I remember John Wimber saying how they used to pray for no one and no one was healed; and then they prayed for everyone and some were healed, and at least it was an improvement.

Secondly, the girl was a slave, used by her owners as an oracle or medium. There are many enslaved people today, apparently more than ever before. We can't change history, but we can change how we react to such issues today. We can make a difference in the lives of enslaved adults and children, just as Paul tried to (and was thrown into prison with Silas for doing so).

APPLY In what ways might God be calling you to advocate for the almost 50 million people* enslaved worldwide today?

PRAY Holy Spirit, help me to pray with greater conviction and courage, with greater vision for the power my God has to heal and restore.

* <https://www.walkfree.org/global-slavery-index/map/>

FROM PRISON TO PRAISE

PRAY As I come to your Word today, Lord God, use it to speak to my mind and heart in ways that transform me into more of who you call me to be.

READ **ACTS 16:29-40**

REFLECT How much of your prayer life is devoted to thanksgiving and praise?

Did Paul and Silas wonder where it all went wrong, or why they'd been diverted to Philippi? And yet, even in prison, they were still praying and singing and worshipping God! The Spirit hadn't left them—Paul could sense what the jailer was about to do. (He couldn't see; there were no lights, v. 29.) The terrified jailer, fearing at least torture if not death if prisoners escaped, wondered aloud 'How do I get out of this mess?'

Is it a deeply theological question? He knew nothing, or next to nothing, about Christian faith and belief. But Paul and Silas knew the deeper answer, as their reply shows. None of them went to bed that night: there was a heart-to-heart about the gospel, and lots of baptizing; the jailer gave them medical attention and a meal, and then... Then there was yet more rejoicing (v. 34). How do you think Paul and Silas felt at that point?

What influence did the prayer and praising have? Think about it in regard to the Holy Spirit, the prisoners, the jailer, and the situation. It's certainly a powerful reminder to 'give thanks in all circumstances' (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

APPLY Is there a difficult situation where God is calling you to choose expressing joy and thanksgiving over fear or despair?

PRAY Forgive me, Father, when, in good times and bad, I have neglected being thankful and expressing my gratitude to you. Help me stay focused on the grace and mercy you pour out in my life each day, and eager to offer you praise.

IS IT WORTH IT?

PRAY Lord, please continue to teach me, to show me your faithfulness, and to convict me where I need to follow you more closely.

READ **ACTS 17:1-15**

REFLECT Jesus never changes: he is the same, yesterday, today, and forever. Recall some of his characteristics you particularly appreciate.

How do you feel when change looms? Psychologists say that fear of change, metathesiophobia, is one of the biggest fears affecting people's lives, and it can paralyze and impede anyone. Change can indeed be scary; we prefer to remain within our comfort zones. Yet anything that doesn't change becomes static or may even die.

So maybe we can sympathize with the rioters in these verses, to some extent. They didn't want anything to change; they believed in the rightness of their beliefs and were not persuaded by Paul's message. They were jealous of the attention Paul was getting and his influence on others. They were jealous, they were fearful, and they incited a riot. And so the pattern continues. Paul preaches, there is huge opposition often leading to imprisonment and torture, so Paul and his companions have to escape (vv. 10, 13).

Dr Helen Roseveare, a Christian missionary who was tortured for her faith in the Congo in the twentieth century, was asked if it was worth it. No, she replied, but he is worthy.

APPLY What would you do if you faced a huge change in your life, especially if it involved opposition to your faith? Would it be worth it?

PRAY Lord Jesus, with thanksgiving, I pray for persecuted Christians around the world and ask that they would know your presence and pleasure as they faithfully follow you.

SPEAKING WORDS OF WISDOM

PRAY Heavenly Father, thank you for giving me your Word so that I might know you and experience the grace and mercy you offer in your Son.

READ **ACTS 17:16-34**

REFLECT Who do you know who needs to hear the good news of Jesus?

While Paul waits in Athens, he engages in Athenian debate. After wandering around sightseeing, he gets involved with the Epicureans, who thought life was 'eat, drink, and be merry', and the Stoics, who believed it was better to live simply, practice self-discipline, and be indifferent to pleasure and pain. Both sides agreed they wanted to hear more about Paul's ideas and took him to the Areopagus to speak to judges, counselors, and philosophers.

Isn't it interesting how different Paul's speech in Athens is from how he has preached before? Here, although distressed by the altars he sees in the city, he immediately looks for ways to connect with the locals. He mentions what is common to them all and then speaks to the culture of their day. He mentions their great interest in spirituality, in creation, and the environment, then he cleverly links it all to the good news of Jesus.

Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would give his disciples words at a time of challenge. 'The Holy Spirit will give you the right words when the time comes' (Luke 12:12, The Message), and we can expect the same. When and where might you be needing 'the right words'?

APPLY What similarities with ancient culture can you spot in our own culture in the twenty-first century?

PRAY Holy Spirit, thank you for your presence and for enabling me to trust you to work not just in me but through me as I seek to serve my Savior.

A GREEN OLIVE TREE

PRAY On this Sunday, Father, I thank you for calling me to follow your Son and rejoice that I have been given abundant life in him.

READ **PSALM 52**

REFLECT How many uses can you describe for olive oil?

Think about your olive oil and where it came from. Maybe sniff it, swirl it around, notice its color. Have you seen olive trees growing in Mediterranean countries? Their leaves are a distinctive grey-green, turning silvery when the wind tosses them. It is a very strong, comparatively stocky tree, able to withstand the fiercest gales, and both the fruit and wood are useful. The pressed oil has historically had spiritual, culinary, and medicinal uses—think of Moses anointing Aaron, David being anointed by Samuel, and the Good Samaritan using oil on wounds.

The olive tree is significant in the Middle East. Certainly, it is to David (v. 8). Saul had tried to kill David several times, and now David was betrayed after he ran away. Saul orders a massacre in retaliation (1 Samuel 21, 22). David is intensely pained by all this evil (vv. 1-4), but what gives him confidence (v. 5)?

Olive trees are short and squat, with strong, massive root systems. In contrast to the weak plant of the wicked enemy, which is easily uprooted, nothing can shake the solid olive tree. This was David's confidence because he was deeply rooted in the faithful and trustworthy God.

APPLY How great is your confidence that God will overcome those who love evil and trust only in themselves? Reread this psalm, asking God to increase your faith as you do.

PRAY Lord God, as did the psalmist, I rejoice that I am like an olive tree flourishing in your house, trusting in your unfailing love forever and always praising you for what you have done (v. 8).

GUIDANCE

PRAY Thank you, Father, for your Word and for the countless ways it offers me assurance, hope, and reasons for thanksgiving.

READ **ACTS 18:1-17**

REFLECT Do you tend to have a fight or a flight personality?

Do you find it difficult to know God's guidance? Or find it comes at the last minute? Or worry that you'll miss God's plans? It's interesting how the Lord guided Paul here—what he needed, when he needed it, often at the very last minute! I used to think that God had a Plan A for my life—the 'right' job, house, spouse, and so on. While I do believe he is interested in the minutiae of my life, I now believe his main plan for me is for a deep, lasting relationship with him. Everything else is secondary.

Corinth was a thriving port at the center of world trade, known for its debauchery and for the huge temple of Aphrodite. Did Paul intend his usual plan—preach in the synagogue, make a few converts, and then move on? He has to wait for the others (v. 5), but then the usual pattern emerges, leading to opposition. Did he then want to depart? Traveling gets into the blood! But Paul has another vision, not to move on this time (vv. 9-11), but to stay put. I wonder how easy—or difficult—he found that.

APPLY In what ways do you apply this saying, 'When the going gets tough, the tough get going' to your life?

PRAY Lord, help me to be willing to ask for and wait for your guidance. And then to take it!

THE MINISTRY OF OTHERS

PRAY Holy Spirit, please use what I read in Scripture today to make me a better witness of Christ, more like him in what I say and do.

READ **ACTS 18:18–28**

REFLECT What important roles do you play in your church community? Leadership? Teaching adults or children? Prayer? Compassion? Evangelism? Mentoring? Encouragement?

Apollos made a considerable impact, through God's grace, on the Corinthian believers (v. 27). When people said they preferred Apollos to Paul, he wrote, 'I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow' (1 Corinthians 3:6). And Luke attributed the impact of Apollos' ministry to God's grace alone.

Sometimes one notices that in a church or group, there's just one leader, keeping firm control over everything and everyone, or that someone is jealous of another's ministry or work. What do you learn in these verses about how the early church worked? They blessed the ministry of others, giving them the freedom to develop their part in God's work of grace. Far from limiting Apollos, who hadn't grasped the full implications of the gospel, Aquila and Priscilla, themselves newly part of the ministry team, gently taught and encouraged him (v. 26).

How easy do you find it to do everything yourself and be in control? Take care: it can lead to burnout for you and stifle the gifts and ministry of others who, through God's grace, are also able to be part of the work. Paul has now added a number of people to his team and, far from seeing it as a threat, he can see that it has enabled the ministry to spread.

APPLY Be intentional to affirm others in your Christian community—their value, and ways you see God at work in and through them.

PRAY Father, give me discernment to know how I can be an encouraging part of my church's ministry and to see the importance of all you call me to do.

IT'S MAGIC

PRAY Holy Spirit, please speak to me today. Help me to wholeheartedly embrace what you show me as I read and reflect on Scripture's story.

READ **ACTS 19:1-22**

REFLECT What difference does the Holy Spirit's power make in your life and in the lives of those you know?

The people of Ephesus, an important city at the center of ancient trade routes, liked power and liked to make things happen. Ephesus was powerful in every way—including a formidable type of magic or sorcery (v. 19). And so, Luke, the author, emphasized the contrast of the power of the Holy Spirit, who was again at work in Paul's ministry. Where was the power of the Spirit most noticeable? Verses 6, 8, and 12. This was in stark contrast to the powers of magic and sorcery. When the power of the Holy Spirit was seen, what were the effects (vv. 17-20)? What a powerful impact indeed!

Where and when have you heard mention of 'sorcery' and belief in magic powers, or even been impacted by them yourself? There are a variety of practices that need to be completely avoided by Christians, such as modern occultism, horoscopes, palm readings, Wicca, alternative spirituality, self-described wizards and witches, and so on. Such beliefs are all flourishing, and many (often young people) are drawn into such practices, especially when exploring spirituality and other 'powers' online.

APPLY How might you pray for people you know to be protected from powers or practices opposed to Christ and to resist their fascination?

PRAY Holy Spirit, thank you for your power and protection, greater than anything or anyone who would come against you and the truth of the gospel.

CHALLENGING THE WORLD

PRAY Jesus, thank you for the hope and joy you offer that can never be taken from me. Thank you for your presence and for your countless blessings.

READ **ACTS 19:23–41**

REFLECT What false idols do you see in culture today?

Walking the streets of Ephesus today, one imagines the enormous, bustling city it once was, with vast statues of gods and goddesses and the Roman Emperor, fountains and public toilets, a majestic library, thriving shops and businesses.

A meteorite had once landed nearby, thought to be the goddess Artemis (Diana to the Romans). Many made their living from her and were exceedingly disgruntled when Paul said that man-made gods are no gods at all. Their livelihoods were threatened, and maybe, underneath it all, they wondered whether their man-made gods were real—they feared being exposed. They were certainly able to stir up enough anxiety to incite the hysterical crowd to chant and riot for several hours. What an impact Paul's words made! Do your words, actions, or life have any impact on those around you?

Perhaps, for many of us, it's been all too easy to be drawn into the world's way of viewing things, to stay quiet when others use God's name for swearing, or to ignore behaviors that go against God's ways. Can we speak out against the world's views, even if it means losing our friends?

APPLY What do you need from the Holy Spirit to stand strong against the world's values?

PRAY Lord Jesus, through the power of your Holy Spirit, help me to turn the world upside down for you.

HOW LONG?

PRAY Sovereign Lord, I praise you, for you are my creator, my protector, and my provider—and I thank you that I am your precious child.

READ **ACTS 20:1-12**

REFLECT Be aware of the Lord's presence with you. Open yourself to what he wants to say. Take all the time you need.

Do you like epic films, such as *The Lord of the Rings* or *Avatar*? Lengthy, all-absorbing adventures? We're a very sedentary generation, and we'll sit for long films but not always for times with the Lord or for lengthy sermons! Someone once said that what orators lack in depth, they make up for in length. I can't think that was true of Paul, who, knowing he was on the move, wanted to ensure he shared as much as possible with his audience. Even Eutychus' accident didn't stop him speaking right through the night. And no one is mentioned as leaving.

I'm reminded of how little time I actually spend going deeper in my love for and in my knowledge of the Lord. How I race through my daily readings or cut short my prayers, or hope the preacher isn't too long on Sunday because I've things to do, places to go, and people to meet. Does that resonate with you too? What might need to change in your attitude to both length and depth in your time with the Lord?

APPLY Think about your priorities. When could you have a longer time? What would that involve? A walk, reading an epistle in one sitting, listening to a podcast or sermon, maybe going on retreat? What needs to be put in your diary/schedule so it happens?

PRAY Father, I confess that I often do not give you the time you deserve, putting other things before you. As I ask for forgiveness, I also ask that you help me keep you first and foremost in all I think and do.

JUST ONE THING

PRAY Lord God, as I read your Word today, please give me understanding and the will to act on what you teach me.

READ **ACTS 20:13–24**

REFLECT What will be your central focus for this day?

Did you ever watch *City Slickers*, a film about some city men who go on vacation out west to learn to be cowboys? The rancher holds up one finger to tell them the secret to life: it's just one thing.

'I'm not indispensable; I just want to go on doing what God has called me to—telling everyone I meet about the extravagant grace of God' (my translation of verse 24). Here is Paul's one thing. Despite all the difficulties and pain he's experienced, and despite knowing there's more to come, Paul is determined to follow God's calling on his life and continue spreading the good news. The power of the Holy Spirit is still filling him as Ananias had said it would (Acts 9:17).

What's your 'one thing'? Money or job; family or friends; possessions or desires? Or something else entirely? If you're absolutely honest, what matters most? What fills your time, your attention, your mind? And how important are you—does your life matter to you?

APPLY Allow the Spirit to show you what's most important to you, being open and honest with yourself. Are confession and repentance needed? A refilling with the Holy Spirit? A rededication to the things of the Lord? A finding of your true one thing?

PRAY Lord, I know that sometimes you aren't the most important thing in my life. Please forgive me and fill me with your Spirit.

WHOSE FOOL ARE YOU?

PRAY Lord, plant your words of truth deep within me, always ready to reassure me, always ready to be shared with others who need to hear them.

READ **PSALM 53**

REFLECT 'We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ!'

Our psalm today classifies fools as those who say there is no God (v. 1). Proverbs 28:26 says a fool trusts in his own understanding. When foolishness pervades one's life, the consequences can be very serious. The psalmist speaks of God putting fools to shame (v. 5). Was there ever a time when you said, 'There is no God'? If there was, what was it that persuaded you otherwise? What might you learn from that, as you think about being witnesses and having a mission in our context?

Most of us do not enjoy being called or taken for a fool, and playing an April Fool's joke on someone can provoke mixed reactions. We cannot always avoid these things happening; sometimes people will call us a fool for our beliefs, our kindness, or the way we seem to live out our Christian faith.

But we are wise (v. 2), not foolish, in God's eyes, if we seek after him. What does seeking God look like for you at the moment? There may be times when we may look foolish to others as we seek God, but ultimately, it is God's view that matters.

APPLY Do you know anyone who categorically believes there is no God? Rather than calling them a fool, how can you be praying for them?

PRAY Lord, give me courage and willingness to stand for the wisdom of the cross that is considered folly by the world around me.

*1 Cor 4:10.

THE POWER OF A BLESSING

PRAY Father, thank you for knitting me together in my mother's womb and for the gift of life each day.

READ **ACTS 20:25-38**

REFLECT When was the last time someone prayed a blessing over you? How did it make you feel?

A young mother came into Bath Abbey, pushing her baby in a stroller. I smiled and asked how old the little one was. 'Just three weeks,' the mother replied. 'May I pray a blessing over her?' I asked. The mother's attitude changed immediately, declining my offer rather coldly, hastily moving on. I was mystified; it's not very often that anyone refuses prayer, let alone a blessing.

Shortly afterward, I led the hourly prayers and ended with, 'A final blessing for you and those you love.' And I raised my hand as I prayed a blessing over the people in the abbey. Afterward, the young mother came to find me. 'Is that what you meant by a prayer of blessing?' she asked. 'Because I'd like that for the baby.' It made me realize that our 'Christian jargon' is not understood by many non-churchgoers. Yet as I prayed a blessing, the mother's face softened; she thanked me and took the 'Why Jesus?' booklet I offered her.

Praying blessings over others is a rich privilege that we often forget. Paul prayed strong blessings over people—here in verse 32 and in his letters to churches. We can pray blessings over others too.

APPLY Look at Paul's different prayers of blessing in Scripture and be encouraged.

PRAY Thank you, Lord Jesus, for your prayers of blessing. Help me learn from your examples and be inspired to offer these kinds of prayers more faithfully over my Christian community and your church worldwide.

LOVE IS THE GREATEST

The prophet Hosea lived during a tumultuous period in Israel's history. The kingdom had become divided, and, with Jeroboam II (one of the worst kings of Israel) on the throne, they were headed for destruction. God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt, provided for them, and led them to the Promised Land, but they had strayed from the covenant that God had made with them at Sinai and had worshipped other gods.

The book of Hosea uses marriage as a metaphor to explore the covenant relationship between God and Israel. A common interpretation of this metaphor positions Gomer, Hosea's wife, as representing unfaithful Israel and Hosea as symbolizing God. Like all metaphors, this metaphor has limitations, and care must be taken not to make problematic extrapolations. Unfortunately, this text has been used to oppress people, particularly women. There may be parts of the readings this week that you find uncomfortable. Before we begin this week's reflections, I want to make clear that the metaphor is not about shaming people who have had extra-marital affairs. It is not about dismissing the pain caused by unfaithfulness. It is not about endorsing slavery or human trafficking. It is not about blaming women as the root of corruption. It is not about God orchestrating suffering for a sermon illustration. Rather, it is about the relentless love of God toward each one of us, and our response.

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MEMORY VERSES FOR THE MONTH

WEEK 1: "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."

- Mark 8:29

WEEK 2: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

- Mark 10:45

WEEK 3: When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.

- Psalm 56:3

WEEK 4: Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth.

- Psalm 57:11



GOD IN GOMER

PRAY Whatever happens today, Lord, thank you for your promise to be with me, always ready and able to help.

READ **HOSEA 1:1-2:1**

REFLECT Take a moment to recall people or situations that have shown you something about the character of God. What did they teach you?

Thank God for these characteristics and for revealing them to you. The Bible is full of examples of God working through people and situations that we find surprising. We often see God in places we might not expect, that seem unlikely, or that cause us (or the religious leaders of the day) to raise our eyebrows. Perhaps you were surprised to read that God told Hosea to 'marry a promiscuous woman'. It doesn't sound like the advice you might expect to hear in church.

The woman who is chosen is Gomer. She gives birth to three children, one of whom is named Lo-Ruhamah, meaning 'not loved'. But notice in verse 8 it says, 'After she had weaned Lo-Ruhamah...'. This little verse shows us that Gomer nursed her child, nurtured her, and protected her. She loved her daughter, regardless of what was said about her. It is through Gomer that God's purposes are brought about, and we see God's love demonstrated.

It wouldn't be the last time that God chose a woman in unlikely circumstances to do this. Many years later, a young woman in Nazareth would be chosen by God to carry a child to reveal God's love.

APPLY Where do you see God at work through surprising people or situations? Pray that God would remove any prejudice and help you to be aware of and open to God at work today.

PRAY Lord, thank you for the ways you choose to work through people, in unexpected and even surprising ways, to show who you are and to bring yourself glory.

FAITH IN THE CREATOR

PRAY Father, thank you for always welcoming my prayers and answering them in ways that are for my good and for your glory.

READ **HOSEA 2:2-23**

REFLECT Where or to whom do you turn when times are tough? In today's reading, Hosea highlights how Israel has been unfaithful to God by offering worship to Baal. Baal (meaning 'master' or 'husband') was the Canaanite god of fertility and rainstorms. As an agrarian society in an arid climate, Israel depended on both for the best of times.

But this was the worst of times. There was political unrest, economic hardship, and trade instability. No doubt anything that would bolster their reserves would have appealed—anything to increase their crop yield, expand their flocks, and grow their population to strengthen their defense; literally anything. Even if it meant not living according to the values that God had called them to live by, even if it meant exploiting the poorest and employing unfair work practices. So, instead of seeking God earnestly, they look to the Canaanite Baals to provide for them. They 'forget' that it is God who is the Creator of the rain and causes all things to grow.

APPLY When times are tough, it can be challenging to depend on God and not place hope elsewhere. Do your choices compromise your faithfulness to God?

PRAY Father, you are always faithful, and I can always trust you for my needs. Help me never doubt your goodness to me.

NON-CONTROLLING LOVE

PRAY Mighty God, it amazes me that you sustain all of creation, and yet you are mindful of me, caring for my every need. I thank and praise you.

READ **HOSEA 3**

REFLECT 'We cannot exercise love unless we are experiencing grace. You cannot truly love others unless you are convinced that God's love for you is unconditional, based solely on the merit of Christ.' (Jerry Bridges)

Whenever anyone uses an analogy in which they may be seen as representing God, I am a little suspicious of how they understand their power in relation to others. So when I read the book of Hosea, it does alarm me that Hosea might have seen himself as taking on the role of God in his relationship with Gomer. But perhaps by doing so, it reveals that God loves in a very different way from how Hosea thinks God loves.

Notice that the instruction God gives in verse 1 is to Hosea and is about how Hosea should love. It is not about how Gomer should love, and neither does God tell Hosea that he should force Gomer to behave in a certain way. Nevertheless, Hosea takes it upon himself to tell Gomer how he thinks she should behave. Hosea might think he is loving Gomer the way that God loves, but actually, he is not. Coercive control is not love—it is abuse. In contrast, the love of God is non-controlling, non-coercive. God's love for us does not falter or depend on our actions—it is unconditional.

APPLY Where might God be calling you to love someone unconditionally?

PRAY Thank you, Jesus, for your love that never fails, that is never turned away from me. Help me to reflect that love in the lives of those around me so that they might see you.

LOVE LANGUAGES

PRAY Lord God, I come to you today, thankful for your work of grace in me, for your love that never fails, and for your care in everything about me.

READ **HOSEA 6:1-7:2**

REFLECT Offer to God those things that concern you today. You might find it helpful to hold clenched fists in front of you and then release them open to God as you pray.

When my now-husband and I were preparing to get married, we were asked whether we knew our 'love languages' and each other's. It sparked a 'debate' between us about how I had thoughtfully, or so I had thought, bought us theater tickets as a surprise for his birthday. It turned out that John did not like surprises, and what he appreciated most about birthdays was being able to specify what he wanted. I could pretend this was the last time we crossed wires, but in our 16 years of marriage, it's happened quite a few more times!

Fortunately, it's not this complicated when it comes to God. God sees our hearts. God sees our intentions. We do not need to package our love for God in particular ways. Equally, nothing gets past God. God sees our inner motives hidden beneath our outer performance—when we're doing the sacrifices and the burnt offerings, as it were, but it doesn't match up with our desires (v. 6). God knows when our 'love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears' (v. 4).

APPLY What does God see in your heart? What motivates you? Is there anything that you try to keep hidden?

PRAY Holy God, make my love for you steadfast, sincere, and deep, unwavering in all that I think and do.

DIVINE PARENT LOVE

PRAY Lord, give me an ever-increasing desire to learn from your Word, for in it is an inexhaustible source of wisdom and of power to transform me into the image of Christ.

READ HOSEA 11

REFLECT Read this summary of Romans 8, verses 38 and 39, several times slowly: 'Nothing can ever come between us and the love of God.' Try emphasizing a different word each time you read it.

In today's passage, God is depicted as a parent who has taught, nurtured, and fed Israel. How we relate to this may depend on our own experiences of being parented, of being a parent, or of the absence of these relationships in our lives. I have two young children, and sometimes they do things I have asked them not to. Usually, after a while, they say they are sorry, and we chat about what they can do to remedy the situation and what they would do differently next time. While I would like them to learn from the situation, what I really want is for them to know that I love them. If that is my desire as a very imperfect parent, how much more does God, as the perfect parent, desire this for us?

In verse 9, God says, 'I will not carry out my fierce anger ... For I am God'. God's very nature is love. God sees everything—the things we have said, done, and thought—and loves us. Nothing is or can be hidden from God.

APPLY Are there things that you have said, done, or thought that you like to keep hidden? How does it feel to know that God sees it all and still loves you?

PRAY Father, help me to experience your love for me in new ways today. Help me respond to its persistent grace and mercy with greater faith and newfound freedom.





GOD OF JUSTICE

PRAY Spirit of God, speak to me through your Word today. Give me a new understanding and help me to have greater determination to put into practice what you teach me.

READ **PSALM 54**

REFLECT Recall times in your life where you have experienced God as your helper. Give thanks to God for being with you and sustaining you.

When I read aloud a psalm such as this, I often squirm a little as I ask God to destroy my enemies. It feels uncomfortable to be asking for something that appears to be at odds with Jesus' teaching to love one's enemies. However, I started to see it differently when I read it through the eyes of a victim of injustice.

I wonder if you have ever been a victim of injustice. It can be a very painful and disorienting experience, in which one can feel powerless or unsure of how to use the power one has. The words of Psalm 54 can be a helpful prayer in such situations. The structure of this seven-versed psalm intentionally places verse 4 at the center: 'Surely God is my help; the Lord is the one who sustains me.' The verses surrounding it demonstrate that we can express to God our pain, our frustrations, our anger, and our desires for an end to injustice. We can trust in God, our helper and sustainer, to enact justice perfectly.

APPLY Where do you see injustice happening today? Use Psalm 54 as a template to pray to God about what might be happening in other countries or in situations with which you are personally involved.

PRAY Surely, you are my sustainer and deliverer, Lord God. I thank you for your help and praise you for your justice that I can always rely on.

THE END IS NOT THE END

PRAY Almighty God, please give me the strength to live righteously, to turn away from things that offend you, to avoid turning back, and to run the race with perseverance.

READ **HOSEA 14**

REFLECT What stories are still unfinished in your life?

The book of Hosea ends with a poem that beckons Israel to repent and describes what the healed Israel will be like—a tree providing shade for people to dwell beneath its branches. There is then a postscript (v. 9), likely written by the editor after Hosea's prophecies had been collated. The editor's message invites Hosea's readers to consider carefully what has been written.

We, reading these prophecies now, know that Israel did in fact fall to the Assyrian Empire after Hosea's prophecies. Was this because they did not repent? Did they repent? We don't know here—the editor doesn't say. Neither are we told what comes of Hosea and Gomer's marriage. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Gomer's name means 'sudden end'.

As we often experience in life, we are left with an unresolved situation and have to live with the tension of not knowing why something happened. It seems the editor is deliberately leaving us with this incomplete ending. Instead, he invites us to continue the narrative—to discern the truth about God's character from the text and respond to God's invitation. There is a lot in life we don't know, but we can know that God is with us in the uncertainty.

APPLY What did you see of God's character portrayed in the book of Hosea that gives you encouragement in life's uncertainties?

PRAY Father, help me to trust in your way for me, to walk in it knowing that your way is right, providing safety and fruitfulness.

THE JOURNEY OF DISCIPLESHIP

Discipleship is an exciting call. Following Jesus, the way Jesus wants us to follow him, is at the same time both a blessed experience and a risky task.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his 1937 classic book *The Cost of Discipleship*, reminds us of the joys and adventures of Christian life. For those who willingly submit to the purpose and plan of God, the yoke they are called to bear can be easy and the burden light (Matthew 11:30).

Even as Jesus prepares his disciples for the exciting journey with him, he makes it very clear that those who follow him will always be in the shadow of the cross. They may be blamed, hated, condemned, and called fanatics. There could be temptations to desert the Lord and even risks to life. Yet Jesus, who never forsakes his dear ones, carries their burdens and gives strength and courage to bear the cross. Ultimately, however, it is a story of hope and triumph.

Mark chapters 9 and 10 are about Jesus equipping the disciples to understand the essence of following him. They touch on key themes like faith, marriage, riches, and servanthood, and includes some wonderful stories of healing. The forewarnings of Jesus about his passion and death are juxtaposed with the disciples' quest for power and authority. The invitation to take a closer look at Jesus, as the life-pattern to emulate, runs through these chapters. We will read stories that help us on our own journey of discipleship.

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WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?

PRAY Lord, help me come to your Word with an open heart and mind today, ready to learn from what I read and eager to apply it to my life.

READ **MARK 8:27-30**

REFLECT Imagine Jesus meets you on your way and asks you a simple question: ‘How about you? Who do you say I am?’ What would be your response?

Two young children were having a conversation. One had an orange in his hand, and he asked his friend, ‘How does this orange taste?’ The friend responded, ‘How would I know unless I taste it myself?’ This experience is true in our God encounters too. Unless we taste and see who Jesus is in our lives, it will not be easy to answer the question: Who is this Jesus we talk about every day?

While it may be easy to say who others say Jesus is, when it becomes a personal question, it requires a deep inner search to respond meaningfully. For others, Jesus could be a prophet, a good human being, the Savior of humankind, the Alpha and Omega, the Living Stone—but the crucial question is: What about you; who do you say he is?

Peter, when asked this question, had no doubt in his mind when he declared, ‘You are the Messiah’ (v. 29). It was his experience, his firm conviction, and the realization he encountered, thanks to the revelation of the Holy Spirit, through his close walk with Jesus.

APPLY In your walk with Jesus, who has he shown/proved himself to be? How has your understanding of who he is grown as you have journeyed with him?

PRAY Lord Jesus, thank you that the longer I walk with you, the more my understanding and appreciation of who you are deepens—Prophet, Priest, King, Savior, friend, brother, and more—thank you for making yourself known to me.

HOW PRECIOUS IS OUR SOUL?

PRAY Gracious God, there is nothing about me that you are unaware of. Thank you that, despite my many failings, as I come to you today, you love me and welcome me into your presence.

READ **MARK 8:31-9:1**

REFLECT Consider your decision or realization that you wanted to follow Jesus. What difference did it make to your life?

Today's passage begins with Jesus challenging his disciples with the insight that, if they want to be his followers, they must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him (v. 34). Is this a message you heard when you decided to follow Jesus? What do you think gets in the way of people following Jesus today?

Jesus then goes on to ask the disciples what good it is for someone to gain the whole world yet forfeit their soul (v. 36). Other translations, such as the NRSV, use the word 'life' instead of 'soul', which perhaps makes it clearer that gaining the whole world and losing your life is a foolish endeavor.

Further, Jesus goes on to ask what they can give in return for their lives, which hints at what his death and resurrection will accomplish—as Christians, we have eternal life because of what Jesus has done.

The passage concludes with a warning about being ashamed of Jesus and his words—something important to consider as we seek to live out our Christian lives. How do people know that you are a Christian?

APPLY What does it mean for you, today, to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus? Is there one action you think God is calling you to today?

PRAY Lord Jesus, help me to follow you boldly, without compromise, never counting the cost, so that others will be drawn to you through me.

A MOUNTAINTOP EXPERIENCE

PRAY Father in heaven, fill me with your Spirit and enable me to live each day in ways that testify to your great love, grace, and mercy.

READ **MARK 9:2-13**

REFLECT Consider some of your mountaintop experiences with Jesus. Which memory stands out most strongly?

I wonder what Peter, James, and John were expecting when Jesus led them up a mountain (v. 2). I would be surprised if they expected what followed—Jesus transfigured and in conversation with Moses and Elijah (v. 4). I wonder how the disciples recognized them. Perhaps they recalled the stories of Moses encountering God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 32-34). Has your journey with Jesus led you to any surprising or unexpected places or encounters? Peter didn't know what to say. He was terrified (v. 6, ESV) and suggested building a dwelling for each of them, perhaps echoing the tabernacle in the wilderness where God dwelt. I wonder what you would have done in Peter's place. Then a voice from above announced that Jesus was the beloved Son (v. 7, ESV), an echo of God's words at his baptism (Mark 1:11, ESV).

As they descended the mountain, Jesus prohibited them from talking about their experience and again talked about his death and resurrection (v. 9), which the disciples still did not understand (v. 10). How hard might it have been not to share such an experience? How do we know whether or not to share with people some of our intimate moments with God? Jesus then confirms the belief that Elijah would return (Malachi 3:1) but also alludes to John the Baptist as a prophet like Elijah (v. 13). A thought-provoking experience.

APPLY When was the last time you shared with someone your experience of Jesus? Look for an opportunity today.

PRAY Thank you, Jesus, for the opportunities you have given me to experience your power, your grace, and your mercy. Thank you for the ways they have strengthened my faith and testimony for you.

IF YOU CAN?

PRAY Lord Jesus, thank you for being willing to suffer the cross and be sacrificed in my place. Thank you for paying my debt so that eternal life could be mine.

READ **MARK 9:14-29**

REFLECT Have you ever encountered a situation where you thought it was beyond even God to be able to help? Yet with fumbling words have you dared to say, 'Lord, if you can...?'

A story is told of Jenny, living in a remote village, who was worried that her eyesight was deteriorating each day. Everything was becoming blurred for her. When it was time for shoebox gifts at Christmas, the village children were excited. Jenny was praying, 'Lord, if you can, please restore my sight. I want to see again.' When the gifts were handed out, surprisingly, there was a pair of spectacles in Jenny's box, and she was astonished that, when she wore them, she could see perfectly. Jenny was amazed at God's provision.

In today's passage, God's provision for the father of the boy with seizures comes through the power and authority of Jesus, who is able to free the child from the evil spirit (v. 25). There will be a range of different perspectives on this story today. Exorcism can be a controversial and potentially abusive practice. The important thing for us to focus on is that Jesus responded with compassion to a father who was distressed over his child and was perhaps seeing Jesus as his last resort. The story is another piece in the jigsaw of Jesus demonstrating that he is the Son of God.

APPLY What are you struggling to believe at the moment? Ask God to help you overcome your unbelief.

PRAY Lord, help me to pray with more praise and anticipation, with greater confidence in your love and power, proven over and over again. Help me to remember that you are always for me; I have no concern or need, great or small, for which I cannot trust you.

GREATNESS OF THE LAST

PRAY Lord, thank you for never turning me away when I come to you; you always welcome my prayers and respond when I ask for your help.

READ **MARK 9:30-37**

REFLECT Think back to conversations you have had about who is or was the greatest or the best. What was at the root of them?

The king and the queen of the little kingdom were overwhelmed when the prince came back from a visit to a remote village and told his parents that he had found his future queen. The entourage immediately set out to see the would-be bride, but were surprised to find the very humble home of a peasant and a charming young lady. The prince said, 'I watched the women fetching water at the village well. This girl came first but allowed the other women to fetch water before her and even helped several of them collect it. After everyone had filled their pitchers, she filled hers and walked home.'

Jesus tells his disciples, yet again, of his impending death and resurrection, and verse 32 says that the disciples were afraid to ask what he meant. Are there things that you are afraid of asking God about or things that you are struggling to understand?

But on the way back to Capernaum, the argument the disciples had was not about what Jesus said but about who was the greatest among them.

Is there anything distracting you from serving God at this time? As Jesus taught, greatness is never in being the first or the best, but in the willingness to be the last and in the joy one finds in serving others.

APPLY Might there be circumstances where Jesus is calling you to be more of a servant, to meet the needs of others before your own?

PRAY Lord Jesus, help me to follow your example of servanthood. Help me find joy in serving and in putting others first.



WHEN FRIENDS BETRAY

PRAY Holy Spirit, open my mind and heart to hear your guidance. However you choose to teach me, help me to respond in ways that draw me closer to my Savior.

READ **PSALM 55**

REFLECT How do you respond when you realize close friends are not on the same side of an issue as you are?

William Shakespeare portrays the assassination of Julius Caesar in a very dramatic manner in his play with the same title. As the conspirators gather around Caesar at the Senate on the Ides of March, he is literally taken aback to see his close friend and associate, Brutus, among them. Caesar's last words, according to Shakespeare, were 'Et tu, Brute?', which means 'You, too, Brutus?' An alternative is offered by Cassius Dio, who suggests the words may have been 'You, too, son?' When family or close friends betray us, it is indeed heartbreaking.

The pain of the psalmist is seen in verses 12 to 15, as he laments over his close friend. In 2 Samuel 15:31, David was told, 'Ahithophel is among the conspirators with Absalom.' This could be the context in which David writes this psalm. The anguish of the heart is not only about the fear of death and the overwhelming horror, but also from the fact that his opponents are those David would have never imagined to be betrayers. However, he trusts the Lord will give him strength to face such difficult situations (v. 22), and this trust in God's saving and sustaining power is threaded through the last eight verses.

APPLY Might there be situations over which your heart anguishes? Take them to God in prayer—he will hear and sustain you. Trust in him.

PRAY Lord, help me never to be a betrayer. When I experience betrayal, help me to trust in you for the strength I need to sustain me.

LOSING OUR SALTINESS

PRAY Father, help me that my gratitude for all you have done is expressed in ways that others can see and be drawn to you.

READ **MARK 9:38-50**

REFLECT Have you ever thought about how salt can lose its saltiness? Have you imagined that it could be your story too? What might it mean in your life?

When the disciples tried to stop someone from doing miracles in the name of Jesus, he told them that those who are not against us are for us (v. 40) and warned everyone not to be stumbling blocks in the way of others (v. 42). What have been some of the stumbling blocks you have experienced or you see being put in the way of people following Jesus today?

When the gospel of Mark was written, salt was a valuable commodity, much more than something that gave food its flavor. It was used as a preservative, important when there were no refrigerators. It acted as a disinfectant, too, as it still does today. It was offered as part of certain sacrifices and symbolized a covenant. Imagine if salt lost its properties to do all of these things. That could be very challenging! It helps us see why Jesus used this analogy to warn his disciples not to lose their saltiness—a distinct possibility. Jesus urges them to always have salt among themselves. The sign of having salt within us is living in peace with each other (v. 50).

APPLY In what ways can you guard against losing your saltiness?

PRAY Help me, O Lord, never to lose my saltiness, to be the salt of the earth, and always to live in peace with others.

CAN ONE PLUS ONE STILL BE ONE?

PRAY Father, thank you not only for Jesus' teaching, but also for his examples of sacrificial love that strengthen and encourage me in my walk of faith.

READ **MARK 10:1-12**

REFLECT When two individuals are united in holy matrimony, have you ever considered what it costs for the two to become one?

While solemnizing a marriage, the minister read from the Bible and told the young couple, 'You are no longer two but one. Do you think that it is possible?' Blinded by love though they were, their eyes did have a look of wonder. The minister said, 'Imagine two wonderful rivers flowing from two directions. At one point, the two rivers merge and then flow together. One plus one has now become a bigger one, and that is the mystery of marriage. Each of these rivers carries with it all its richness and merges into the richness of the other, and together they form an entirely new and beautiful entity.'

Here, Jesus offers some wonderful insights into marriage in response to the Pharisees' question about divorce (vv. 7-9). Why do you think the Pharisees asked this question? Marriage calls for prayerful giving up, thoughtful adjustments, and intentional initiatives; not the hardness of heart that led to Moses permitting divorce (v. 5). The affirmation that it is God who joins people together not only adds to the spiritual dimension of marriage but also points to the responsibility of the partners in safeguarding and protecting marriages as sacred. The passage is another example of the disciples seeking clarity in private about something Jesus taught publicly (vv. 10-12). Does it raise questions for you?

APPLY Might there be those who are struggling in their marriages at the moment, as well as those who are feeling the loss of bereavement or divorce, or are experiencing unwanted singleness, whom you can encourage today?

PRAY Lord Jesus, I pray for the marriages in my Christian community, that each couple will reflect the profound relationship of love and commitment you have for your bride, the church.

BEING LIKE CHILDREN

PRAY My God, thank you for the truths in your Word you have made real and personal for me. Help me to share them with others so that they might come to know you.

READ **MARK 10:13-16**

REFLECT Think about what good qualities of being a child we lose as we age.

Children can be much wiser than we think, and we sometimes underestimate their spiritual wisdom. A chaplain tells of how he was using nesting dolls with a child, and she asked the question 'Which one is God? Is it the smallest one who lives inside of me or the biggest one who holds all the others?' What wisdom from a child has surprised you?

When Jesus tells his disciples that anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it, he is, in fact, urging all of them to consider the childlike qualities that people sometimes lose as they age. These could be crucial qualities for the kingdom culture Jesus envisages. The invitation of Jesus has not only been 'Let the children come' but is also 'Come to me as children would.'

The words and actions of Jesus here may have been particularly shocking to those listening, because of the low status of children. Children were powerless, and it would not have been obvious how the kingdom could come through powerlessness rather than through more traditional, forceful means. But in powerlessness, there is only God to depend on.

APPLY Spend some time with little children, appreciating how dependent they are on their parents or caregivers as they seek help and comfort.

PRAY Thank you, Lord Jesus, that your call requires nothing but my response of faith, that you have already provided everything I need to enter your kingdom.

RICHES IN HEAVEN

PRAY Lord God, give me a heart that desires nothing more than you, that puts you first in all I think or do.

READ **MARK 10:17-31**

REFLECT Where is your investment? Is it here on earth, or is it up above?

The legend of King Gondoforos, well known in my eastern culture, speaks of how he invited an apostle who was a carpenter to build a castle for him.

Instead of building the castle, the apostle distributed the money provided to the poor. When the king summoned him, the apostle answered that the castle for the king was already completed in heaven. The furious king imprisoned the apostle. The same night, the king dreamed that he was at the pearly gates. He was shown a beautiful house and was told, 'This is what you have invested while you lived on earth.' The king woke from his dream and ordered the apostle's immediate release and dedicated the rest of his life to serving the poor and the ordinary.

In asking what he had to do to inherit eternal life (v. 17), I wonder what the rich man was expecting Jesus to say... Perhaps he was hoping that keeping the commandments would be enough (v. 20). We do not hear whether the rich man did as Jesus told him. It is one of the many unanswered questions in the Bible! What do you think?

Jesus says, 'all things are possible with God' (v. 27). We may not always know the impact of words spoken and how they may later bear fruit.

APPLY What investment of eternal value can you make today?

PRAY Help me, O Lord, to see the riches of the kingdom of God immeasurably greater than the riches of this world.

THE SHADOW OF THE CROSS

PRAY Thank you, Father, that, no matter how long my walk of faith and no matter how long I study your Word, your Spirit continues to teach me, to deepen my faith, and give my testimony greater impact.

READ **MARK 10:32-34**

REFLECT What are the risks of discipleship for you today? What is helping or hindering you from moving forward?

The story of Christianity is also a story of many martyrs, such as Eric Liddell (as told in the film *Chariots of Fire*). The Olympic athlete and missionary knew he faced an uncertain future in China, yet he chose to go, just as Jesus here chooses to continue to Jerusalem (v. 32). Have there been points in your journey when it has been hard to choose to continue?

In every missionary journey, there is the constant presence of the shadow of the cross—the knowledge that being called to follow Jesus is costly and may embrace suffering or even death, as Jesus explains to his disciples in this passage. As Jesus walks up to Jerusalem with his disciples, he is aware of what awaits him (vv. 33, 34). He makes it clear to the twelve that tough days are inevitable, while also giving them the larger picture of the salvation narrative. Those who follow are afraid because it is a known fact that a conspiracy is being hatched to get rid of Jesus.

Here, Jesus is giving them a realistic picture of discipleship. It is going to be costly. Was that clear to you when you began to follow Jesus? There are many places around the world where choosing to follow Jesus is a risky option, and the shadow of the cross is apparent.

APPLY Do you see the shadow of the cross in your journey of discipleship? For courage, what do you do to focus on Jesus' empty tomb?

PRAY Lord Jesus, thank you for those who are willing to follow you in the hard places of the world. I lift them up to you, asking that you encourage and protect them, that you give them a profound sense of your love and presence.

NOT TO BE SERVED BUT TO SERVE

PRAY I come to your Word today, Father, with all of my weaknesses, as well as my strengths. Thank you for using all of who I am to serve you. Please help me to bring you glory today.

READ **MARK 10:35-45**

REFLECT Think about your expectations as you follow Christ. In what ways are they biblically shaped?

Bishop Jesudasan, former moderator and bishop of the Church of South Africa, was once approached by church leaders. They were debating which image of Christ should be featured in the central stained-glass window, which was costing a great deal of money. After listening to them, the bishop asked, 'Why do you want to spend so much when the needs of the last, the least, and the lost around you are so great?' Noticing the silence in the room, he continued: 'Jesus came to serve, and if you want to look at an image that would challenge the people, then look at a servant image of Jesus. Why not a simple image of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples with a towel around his waist?'

James and John were surely thinking about a Messianic kingdom 'here and now' when they came to Jesus, saying, 'We want you to do for us whatever we ask' (v. 35). What they wanted were the prime positions on the left and the right of Jesus. 'These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared', Jesus told them (v. 40), reminding them again that 'whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all' (vv. 43, 44).

APPLY Take an inventory of those things you ask Jesus for, carefully considering what or whom those things serve.

PRAY Lord Jesus, help me to follow your example of humility—ever willing to serve, never seeking to be served.



GOD WHO KNOWS OUR TEARS

PRAY Lord God, thank you for your work of grace in me, for your sustaining power, for your love and care.

READ **PSALM 56**

REFLECT When the going gets tough, how does God show his love and care for you?

The psalmist was having a tough patch in his life. The Philistines had successfully pursued and perhaps reached him (v. 1). Despite this, the psalm offers a note of hope, best seen in the final section, where the psalmist affirms that he will present his thank-offerings to God (v. 12). How easy do you find it to praise God in times of persecution or challenge? I wonder if this is one of the psalms Jesus reflected on as he talked and thought about the way he was being pursued by enemies who wanted to kill him. Have you ever had to keep going despite the opposition? How did you handle that?

Such persecution and opposition still happen today. A missionary had been through tough times. In a brutal attack, her husband and two sons were killed. Though she forgave the perpetrators, life was not easy. Haunting memories and questions kept coming back to her. When her faith was tossed like a roller coaster, she would always return to the promise in Psalm 56:11—‘in God I trust and am not afraid’. She drew strength from knowing that God does not overlook our misery and he keeps count of our tears (v. 8).

APPLY Might you be facing challenges where more of your prayers need to be turned to praise, to proclamations of trust in your loving and faithful God?

PRAY Help me, Lord, to be ever mindful that when I shed tears, you are there by my side and I can trust in you.

JESUS' QUESTION

PRAY Lord, as I anticipate fulfilling the responsibilities this day holds for me, use them as opportunities to bless others.

READ **MARK 10:46-52**

REFLECT What helps us really see? How do we look with more than just our eyes?

'Let every veil that blinds us from seeing the design of God for our lives be lifted so that we can dance the divine choreography,' the pastor said as he was teaching about prayer. One person quipped, 'But I am not blind; I can see.' The pastor smiled and asked him, 'Are you sure? Can you really see? Do not forget that sometimes people with vision challenges can see with their hearts more clearly than those who think they can see. A wise thing to do is to constantly pray, 'Lord, I want to see.'

Bartimaeus heard that Jesus was coming to town, so he shouted out for mercy. Though the crowd tried to hush him, he caught Jesus's attention, who called him near. Throwing aside his cloak, Bartimaeus came to Jesus and Jesus asked him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' That was a challenging question for Jesus to ask—it does not always have an obvious answer, although it did in this case. If Jesus asked you that question today, what would your response be? Would you look to respond 'Lord, I want to see' with Bartimaeus, or would it be something else? As we ponder this question, do we think there is a difference between what we want and what God sees that we need?

APPLY Close your eyes and be still for just a minute. What comes to your mind's eye, to your other senses?

PRAY More and more, Lord, give me wisdom to see as you see, to see beyond the immediate to the eternal, to see what pleases you and brings you glory.

LIFE-CHANGING TRUE STORIES

Storytelling: what a gift, for those who skillfully tell stories and for those of us who excitedly hear them! Just now, I'm reading Dickens' *Great Expectations*, and I'm absolutely loving being immersed in the first half of the nineteenth century. Some personalities and motivations don't change!

The book of 2 Samuel may have been compiled during the exile of God's people, but was written earlier, as the events unfolded. It tells the true story of the nation of Israel around 1,000 BC and, especially in this series of readings, of the life events and person of King David.

Try reading or listening to chapters 8-20 in one sitting. You may not enjoy everything, but it will give you a much better grasp of all that's going on.

The exquisite storytelling draws us deeply into thinking about some of the big themes that are as relevant to our own lives as they were to David's. Through our readings, we'll reflect on God's story (What is he planning? What has he promised? What is he doing? What does he want?) and David's story (To what extent does his life reflect God's nature?). We'll also have a go at telling our own story (What is God doing with us now? Where might he want to take us next?) and bring it to the Lord in prayer.

Ready for some life-changing true story-hearing and telling?

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DEVOTED

PRAY Thank you, Jesus, that you keep your every promise. Help me to be faithful in all the things I say and do.

READ **2 SAMUEL 8**

REFLECT 'You are not your own; you were bought at a price' (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20). The price was Jesus' blood. Thank him who gave everything for you.

Maybe we'll struggle with this part of David's story. We want to love and applaud him, because we know he's a 'good guy', 'a man after my own heart', says God (Acts 13:22), but here we find him slaughtering tens of thousands of soldiers (including some through what seems like a cruel kind of Russian roulette, v. 2), crippling horses, (v. 4) and carrying off tons of his enemies' gold, silver and bronze (vv. 7-10). To us, these actions seem abhorrent.

However, if we look more closely, we see that somehow God is right at the heart of everything. God's story is that he wants security for his people (2 Samuel 7:10, 11), and David ensures this happens. The Lord is behind his success (vv. 6, 14), and David dedicates his spoils of war to the Lord (vv. 7, 11, 12). Externally, securing Israel's borders, he's God's man for the job (v. 14); internally, he further strengthens the nation with good, structured government (vv. 16-18). However it looks, David is 'doing what was just and right for all his people' (v. 15).

However tough and messy the events, challenges, and relationships of our daily lives, Jesus' devotion to us inspires us to stay devoted to finding the 'just and right', Jesus-glorifying way through it all.

APPLY Try telling God your own story now, letting him know just how much you love him and reflecting on your attempt to live with him right at the heart of everything. What might he be saying to you in response?

PRAY Holy Spirit, as I reflect on my unfolding story, help me to live it in ways that bring glory to Jesus, my Redeemer and King.

DISTRACTED

PRAY Lord, plant your Word deep in my heart, not only for my benefit, but also for the benefit of those with whom I am able to share it.

READ **2 SAMUEL 11**

REFLECT 'I will listen to what God the Lord says; he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants—but let them not turn to folly' (Psalm 85:8).

With peace and success can come complacency, a belief in our own invincibility. In this moment of David's story, he wants what he wants, and why not? Doesn't he deserve it? It all starts with a distracted glance from the palace roof (v. 2), but it leads to David forgetting others, God, and the holiness in his people that the Lord desires (v. 27).

A constant theme in God's story has been that his people should reflect who he is to those around them who don't know him. God identifies so fully with his people that their reputation becomes his. (He still does this with the church today.) I wonder how safe God's reputation is with us. God even gave special instructions that the king shouldn't 'turn from the law to the right or to the left' (Deuteronomy 17:20). No wonder David wants to keep his sin quiet! Most of us keep quiet about our sins too. Generally, we don't post, stream, or chat about them. But of course, 'Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight' (Hebrews 4:13). So, this frees us up amazingly to tell him all about them.

APPLY Might you have sins you are hiding from those around you? God waits for your confession and repentance to offer you forgiveness and strengthen your testimony for him.

PRAY Father, fill me with a desire to serve you without even the smallest compromise. Thank you for your Spirit, who not only convicts me of sin, but also speaks to others through my walk with you.

DEVASTATED

PRAY As I read your Word today, Father, teach me more of who you are and how to better walk with you and for you.

READ **2 SAMUEL 12**

REFLECT Storytelling is powerful! Nathan's story from God hits home with David. Can you remember a time when words from God stopped you in your tracks?

Initially outraged at the horrific injustice the rich man perpetrates (vv. 5, 6), David is devastated, then contrite, when Nathan points out that the real guilty party is David himself (v. 7). His acts of adultery, murder, and therefore unbelievable selfishness, in spite of God's overwhelming generosity (v. 8), are abhorrent to God. From here on, David's story will be one of strife and heartache (v. 11). An epidemic of sinfulness will spread through David's family and nation, the consequence of his abuse of power and string of poor choices.

In God's story, sin is always taken very seriously. Here God calls what David does 'despising' him and his Word (vv. 9, 10). So, it's not just a casual slip-up then! Of the 'six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him' (Proverbs 6:16-19), it seems to me that David commits them all! So how amazing it is that, through Nathan, God still tells him, 'The Lord has taken away your sin' (v. 13), and, even more so, that Jesus 'takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29).

APPLY Prayerfully reflect on Proverbs 6:16-19. Might there be anything for which you need to seek God's forgiveness?

PRAY Lord Jesus, thank you for purchasing my pardon. Help me readily recognize my sin and confess it quickly, knowing that there is no sin I confess that will not receive your forgiveness.

DIMINISHED

PRAY Holy Spirit, help me to be attentive to what you say to me today and ready to apply what you teach me.

READ **2 SAMUEL 15**

REFLECT ‘The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears; I have not been rebellious, I have not turned away’ (Isaiah 50:5).

Handsome Absalom, David’s third son, aims for popularity with the common people. One day, he hopes, he’ll lead them in an uprising against his father and grab the crown for himself. For now, he’s letting everyone know he’s ‘royal’ (vv. 1, 6) and builds his reputation by getting down to the people’s level (v. 2), by applauding their claims to justice (v. 3), and by massaging their egos (v. 5). Absalom being a very slick operator, the people fall in line behind him (v. 6). Gradually, subtly, and for a very long time (v. 7), Absalom diminishes David’s role and credibility in his people’s eyes.

In God’s story, he has chosen David as king: ‘I have chosen David to rule my people Israel’ (1 Kings 8:16). David is God’s man. By undermining his role, Absalom is working against God’s plans. While the words of Psalm 2:1–3 ring true for the surrounding nations bent on doing Israel harm, Absalom is also playing his part in plotting from within ‘against the Lord and against his anointed’ (Psalm 2:2).

APPLY As part of your own story, share with God how your heart aches when you see his glory on the earth diminished by people’s selfish ambition. What are you thinking of in particular? And what from Scripture does God want to say to you in response?

PRAY When I am disheartened, Father, thank you for your Word and for the ways you speak to me through it, offering me encouragement and reason to trust you.

DETERMINED

PRAY Lord God, wherever I go, whatever I do today, help me to be ready to do your will and eager to serve those around me.

READ 2 SAMUEL 15

REFLECT ‘Take my moments and my days; let them flow in endless praise.’* Will you praise endlessly? Do at least a bit of it now!

After resting on his laurels and inadvertently letting Absalom make a bid for the crown, David wakes up to what’s actually happening (v. 13). Suddenly, he’s on track again with his role and with God. David’s story isn’t over yet, although the country folk watching him think it may be (v. 23). No, David emerges with fresh determination. Wise call follows wise call. Did you spot them in today’s verses? If not, take another look.

David recognizes and acts on the Lord’s sovereignty, knowing he’s at work. This is primarily God’s story. First, with his loyal supporters and soldiers, the king strategically and compassionately flees Jerusalem, so the city isn’t trashed and the people slaughtered (though, horribly, the ten concubines are left to their fate, v. 16). Next, he generously gives permission for the Gittites to stay in the city—it’s not their battle, after all (vv. 19–22). Nevertheless, they choose to leave and follow David.

David refuses to use the ark as a kind of personal protection device (v. 25) because he knows God is with him everywhere he goes—it’s all in the Lord’s hands (v. 26).

When it looks as if he’s finished, too, Jesus makes right call after right call ... all the way to the cross. Knowledge of God’s sovereignty makes the hardest path possible. It’s when Jesus knows it’s time for him to ‘leave this world and go to the Father’ (John 13:1) that he picks up a towel and washes feet.

APPLY Might there be situations in which God is calling you to choose and follow him, even though it feels like the harder choice?

PRAY Lord Jesus, give me the faith and courage to always follow you, to make you my first and only choice in all that I do.

*‘Take My Life and Let It Be’, Frances Ridley Havergal, 1874.



DELIVERED

PRAY Thank you, Father, for being ever mindful of me, providing for my every need, and able to protect me from anything that would come against me.

READ **PSALM 57**

REFLECT If you plotted your life of faith on a graph, would you say you're living at a high point (joyful and praising) or a low point (sorrowful and crying out for help)? Tell the Lord why.

The title of this psalm tells us that David, in an earlier period of his life, was hiding from Saul in a cave. However, if we glance through the verses again, we'll see just how appropriate they sound for David's later situation with Absalom.

Psalms being songs, this one seems to start softly but with dark undertones, growing louder and more confident. It suddenly dips again at verse 4, before the crescendo of praise in verse 5. The cycle restarts, first low and mysterious (v. 6), then rising to the final crashing climax in verse 11. The Lord will deliver him. When David remembers all the Lord is and all he does, gradually he raises his voice, and we can imagine him lifting his head: O God, all glory to you, everywhere!

The Lord draws me out of myself, too, so that I realize it's all about him—he has 'mercy' (v. 1), is my 'refuge' (v. 1), is the 'Most High' (v. 2), 'saves me' (v. 3) and showers me with 'his love and his faithfulness' (v. 3). I've started here to list the good news about the Lord in this psalm, but can you go from verse 4 and draw out the rest?

And suppose 'those who hotly pursue me', the 'lions', 'ravenous beasts' and horrendous, spear-toothed 'men' (vv. 3, 4) could represent all 'the devil's schemes' to defeat Christians (Ephesians 6:11, 12)? Enjoy reading the psalm again in the light of the extraordinary rescue Jesus brought us by his death.

APPLY Which attribute or action of God encourages you most today? Why?

PRAY God Most High, I worship you, for in you I find safety, love beyond measure, and never-ending faithfulness.

DISOBEYED

PRAY Holy Spirit, please grow in me a humble attitude and the heart of a servant. Continue to show me how to be a blessing in my faith community.

READ **2 SAMUEL 18:1-18**

REFLECT Read Psalm 131:1, and come to your Bible time today in humility, waiting on the Lord.

Some Bible passages leave us with more questions than answers. For me, this is one of them. I understand all the words and can follow the storyline, but it's with people's motivations that I struggle, and with trying to see God's story in it all. How was the reading for you?

The first five verses are fine—Absalom is trying to kill David, so his troops advise the king to stay in the city (v. 3). Complete sense. And David, being a loving father despite his son's desire to murder him, wants his army commanders to treat Absalom gently—that is, not kill him (v. 5). But they disobey and do kill Absalom, and that's where my questions begin.

If Joab is so loyal to David, why doesn't he do as the king asks and treat Absalom gently (v. 14)? Since David's order is made very publicly (v. 5), why does Joab risk his position and possibly his life by disobeying it? Does he think that he knows better than the king, that killing Absalom is the only sure way of making sure he doesn't cause more trouble? And what sort of commander would drop one of his troops right in it (v. 13)? And why treat the king's son's body so disrespectfully (v. 17)?

However much isn't clear, what is clear is that, with Absalom gone, David now has no obvious heir. So has God's plan for the house of David fallen in a heap? And not just the plan for the next king in line—what about God's promise to 'establish the throne of his kingdom forever' (2 Samuel 7:13)? Well, what do you think?

APPLY Have you had plans that did not turn out as expected? Know you can count on God carrying out his plans for you.

PRAY Lord, even when I find your Word puzzling, I thank you because I know you will always make clear those things I need to build my faith and strengthen my walk with you.

DISTRAUGHT

PRAY Lord Jesus, help me to follow in your footsteps, to live my life in ways that please you and draw others to your gospel.

READ **2 SAMUEL 18:19–19:8**

REFLECT Lay before the Lord anything in your or your family's life that is preoccupying you and perhaps weighing heavily. Remember, 'my help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth' (Psalm 121:2).

Cushite messenger: 'You're free of threat!' David: 'But what about Absalom?' Messenger: 'Um...'. Result? Even though Absalom has been trying to kill him (17:12), David is naturally distraught at the loss of his son (18:33). Another bitter moment in David's story. In fact, he gets so caught up in his own grief that he neglects his royal, God-given duties... That is, until, shrewdly, Joab jolts him out of it (19:5–7). Then suddenly he's back being the king God anointed him to be (19:8). We can't just abandon who God has made us and what he has given us to do.

In God's story, there's no 'slumber nor sleep' for him (Psalm 121:4), nor the relinquishing of his responsibilities as the 'Lord your God' (2 Samuel 18:28). 'If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself' (2 Timothy 2:13)—he is our good and faithful God, always.

As we discover in Psalm 89:3, 4, there's a lot of 'forever-ness', including around King David, that God has to work on!

APPLY Tell God your own story of times when you were so in need yourself that you almost felt like giving up on faith. Be thankful that he never fails or forgets—he 'will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore' (Psalm 121:8).

PRAY Father in heaven, thank you for never leaving me. Even when I don't sense your presence or I forget your promise to be with me always, thank you for your constant and loving care.

DECISIVE

PRAY Loving Savior, thank you for your grace and mercy offered to me each day. Please help me relate to others in ways that reflect your love for me.

READ **2 SAMUEL 19:9-20:2**

REFLECT Enjoy quiet, if you can. In God's story, you and the Lord are at peace, together forever. What do you want to say to him before digging into today's reading?

This part of David's story sees him attempting to regain people's support after their loyalty transferred to Absalom. He must respond to the people's demand, return to Jerusalem now, and take control again. But with all David has been through, notice his extraordinary generosity of spirit.

Rather than punishing Amasa, Absalom's general, he makes him commander of his own army (19:13). Shimei seeks forgiveness for pelting David and his officials with rocks when they were escaping from Jerusalem earlier (16:6-8; 19:19, 20). David responds to Shimei's plea—'May the king put it out of his mind' (19:19). There's no recrimination of any sort by the king (19:23), and of Joab and his murder of the king's son, there's not a word. Despite Israel's and Judah's bickering about which of them has the strongest case for the privilege of bringing David back (19:40-43), there's no response recorded from David.

The decisive, peaceful way in which David deals with Absalom's rebellion and its consequences is remarkable. Even if it's tactical, to reintroduce peace and calm to troubled times, the powerful king could have chosen another way.

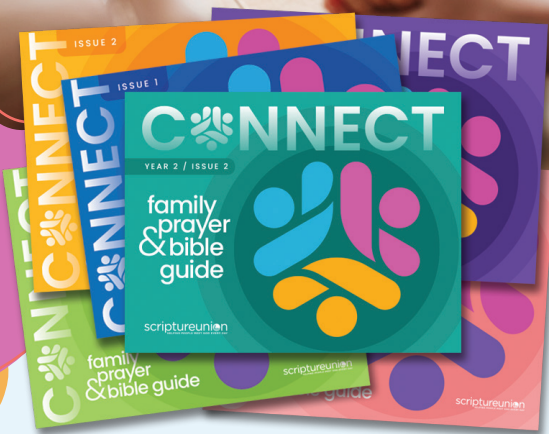
And what peace another King so generously and decisively brought into our lives: '... since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ ...' (Romans 5:1).

APPLY Forgiveness in Christ required something greater by far than any forgiveness you can offer others. Might there be someone who needs your forgiveness?

PRAY Thank you, Father, that in your Son, I have known forgiveness, and that you have offered me grace and mercy beyond measure.



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